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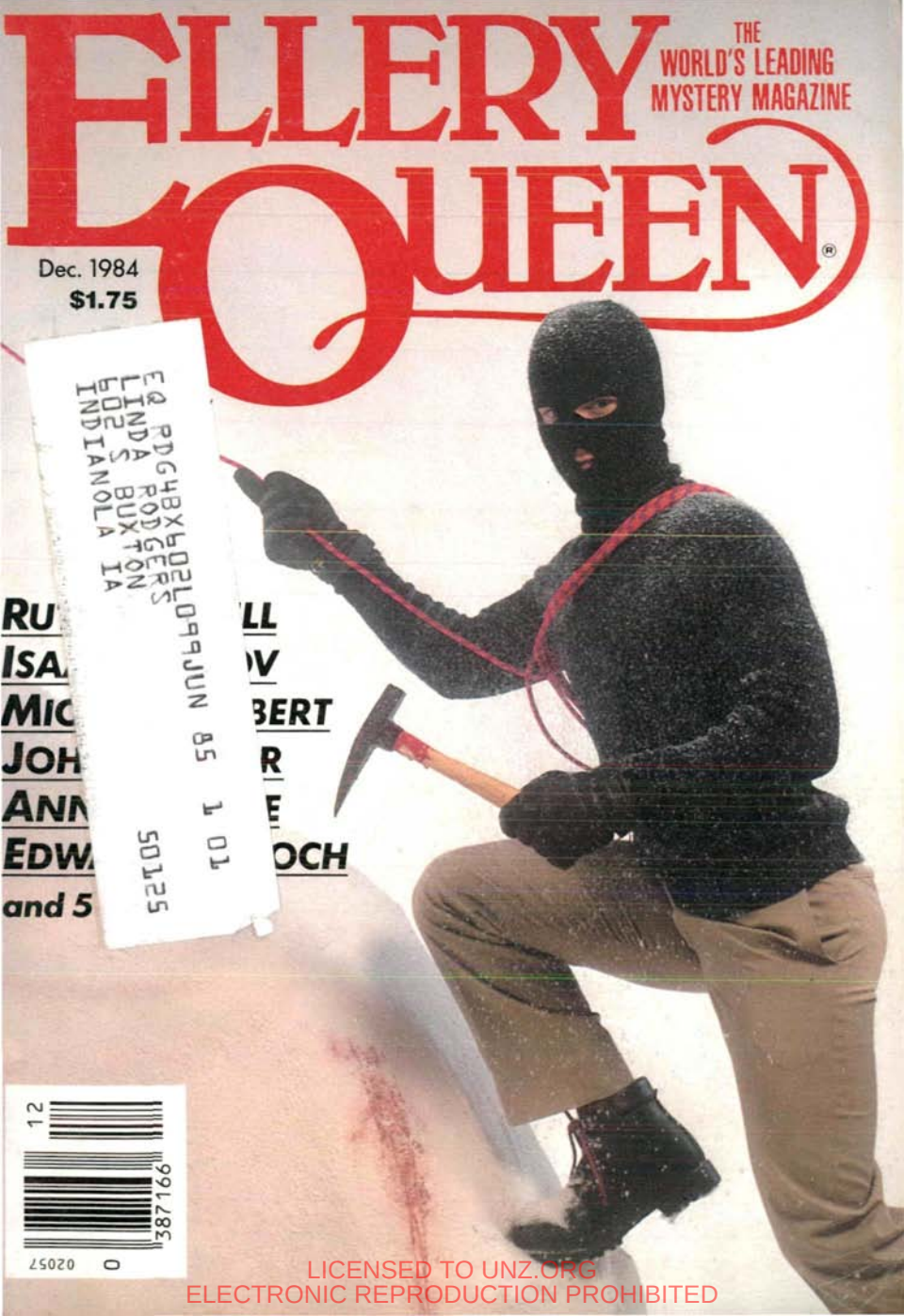

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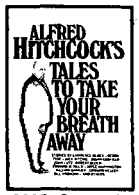

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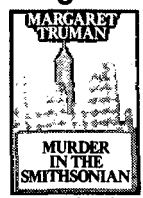

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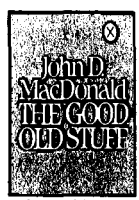

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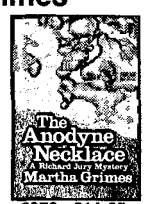

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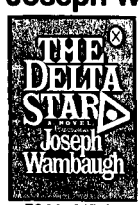

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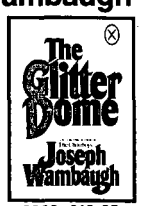

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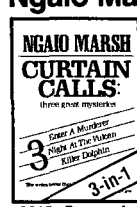

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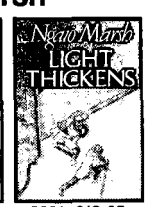

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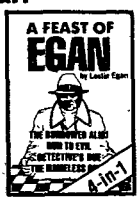

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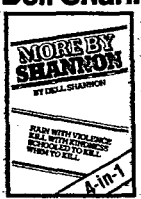

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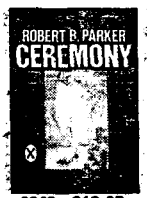

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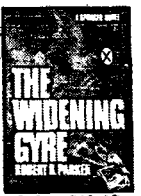

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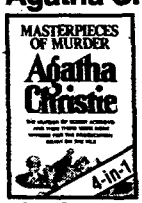

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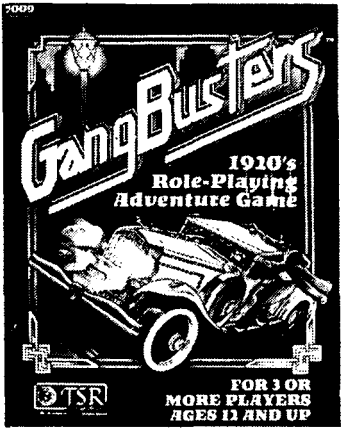

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a ***NEW*** **Ben Snow story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

While Dr. Wisdom continued his patter, Katie, in her spangled tights, moved from one corner of the wagon to another, lighting torches with magical ease until the area was bathed in firelight. The spectators moved in a bit closer, as if the flames offered protection from the night . . .

THE 500 HOURS OF DR. WISDOM

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The business at Waycliff Station came very early in Ben Snow's career, at a time when his reputation as a fast draw with a gun often led people to confuse him with that other boyish gunman, Billy the Kid. Billy had been dead two years by the time Ben rode into Waycliff Station on that November afternoon in 1883, but news traveled slowly in the western territories in those days. After all, it had taken more than a week for the news of Custer's massacre at the Little Big Horn to reach Washington in '76, and that was a far bigger story than the shooting of Billy the Kid.

So perhaps it was not surprising in those days that people confused the 24-year-old Ben Snow with Billy—though in a place like Waycliff Station it hardly mattered, because the five hundred residents led a life almost completely cut off from the outside world. Even the train that came through at noon every day, prepared to stop if it was flagged down, brought little contact with eastern civilization.

It was the sort of sleepy western town that Ben Snow liked, one where his growing reputation as a gunfighter wouldn't matter, where perhaps he could find a few weeks of peace before moving on.

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The few score houses and stores were clustered around the railroad tracks, and when Ben rode into town on his horse, Oats, there were some children playing in the streets. "Which way's the boarding house?" he asked one—a sandy-haired boy, who eyed his pistols and asked, "You a gunfighter, mister?"

"No, just a traveler."

"Seen any injuns?"

"Nary a one."

"You can stay at Mrs. Jester's place," one of the older boys volunteered. "The white house at the end of the street."

"Thanks."

Ben rode on, taking note of the saloon and the blacksmith's shop, the only establishments he was likely to need during his stay at Waycliff Station. Mrs. Jester's house proved to be a neat-looking place with a fenced-in front yard. There was a small sign in one window: *Rooms by day or week.* He tied Oats to the hitching post out front and went inside.

Mrs. Jester was a slim, middle-aged lady with a ready smile. "We don't get many strangers in Waycliff Station," she told Ben. "How long you fixin' to stay?"

"A week or two maybe. I been drivin' cattle up from Texas and I need a bit of a rest."

"You won't find no wild goings-on around here, if that's what you're hankerin' for."

"Nothing wild," he assured her. "Just some peace and quiet."

"All right, you can bed down in the room at the top of the stairs. Here's the key. It'll be five dollars a week, meals included."

"Seems fair enough." He hefted his saddlebags and started up the stairs.

"Cash in advance. Since my husband died, I gotta be a businesswoman."

"Sure." Ben handed over some silver dollars, smiling, finding her attractive for a woman probably in her forties.

"Dr. Wisdom's in town tonight, so we'll be eating early."

Ben paused on the bottom step. "Dr. Wisdom?"

"He comes through with his medicine show about once a month—does a little magic and then sells his tonics and stuff. He's got a girl named Katie traveling with him now."

"I'd like to see it," Ben said, deciding it was probably the most he could expect in terms of local entertainment.

The upstairs room was pleasant and flowery, with a fancy spread

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on the bed. He hung his duster in the wardrobe and glanced out the window. There was a good view looking down the town's main street toward the railroad tracks at the far end. A pleasant little place, he decided. A good place to relax.

It was starting to get dark as the townsfolk gathered around the wagon just down the street from Mrs. Jester's boarding house. Ben stood at the edge of the crowd, marveling at the cheers that greeted the appearance of a slender, bearded man with deep dark eyes.

"Good evening, folks," he began. "It's always a pleasure for me and Katie to visit in Waycliff Station. I've brought you some new wonders this month—and one of them is the biggest wonder you're ever likely to see. I'm selling you something better than all the patent medicines ever made, something more valuable than money. But first let me introduce my gorgeous assistant, Katie!"

Katie stepped from the back of the wagon and stood at his side. She was a pretty redhead dressed in spangled tights that seemed somehow shocking on the dusty street. One of the men standing nearest her immediately made a grab for her leg, but she fended him off with a smile and a firm hand. Then, while Dr. Wisdom continued his patter, she moved from one corner of the wagon to another, lighting torches with magical ease until the area was bathed in firelight. The spectators moved in a bit closer, as if the flames offered protection from the night.

Dr. Wisdom and Katie put on a little show for the next fifteen minutes, running through a series of simple magic tricks with cards and silver dollars. Ben had seen better in the cities, but this wasn't bad for a town out in the middle of nowhere. When they'd finished, he figured a sales pitch for Wisdom's tonics and nostrums would come next, but Dr. Wisdom was selling something quite a bit different.

"This month, my good friends, I'm selling *time*—the most important commodity in the world! Out here you might wonder what's so important or valuable about it, when one day's pretty much the same as another. But let me tell you, time is the greatest tonic of them all. And I assure you this is no trick. I'm prepared to sell you extra time, by the hour or by the day—time that will not be part of the calendar or the clock. If you buy a day or a week or a month from me, it will not count toward your lifetime. You may do with it what you will, and at the end of the period the time outside Waycliff Station will resume as if nothing had happened. Time—and

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life—in the rest of the world will have remained frozen while you do what you will with those extra hours."

A stout man in the front row of spectators spoke up. "Come on now, Doc, you're kidding us! You expect us to swallow that hogwash?"

"Not without proof, Sheriff Spofford. I sure don't want to get run in for false advertising. That's why I've prepared a little demonstration. I have five hundred hours for sale tonight, enough to sell one hour each to every resident of Waycliff Station. You'll experience it for yourselves. I will sell these individual hours for the modest sum of one dollar each, as a demonstration."

There was a stirring in the crowd and Mrs. Jester spoke up. "If we buy one, when do we get our hour?"

"November eighteenth, at noon. That's the day after tomorrow."

"It's Sunday!" someone said. "Nothing ever happens on Sundays anyhow."

Dr. Wisdom smiled. "Something will happen this Sunday. There'll be twenty-five hours in the day for them that buys an extra one."

"What'll we do with an extra hour on a Sunday?" Mrs. Jester wondered.

"Have a picnic," the sheriff suggested. "We'll shut down the town and have ourselves a picnic."

"Too cold for a picnic," another voice chimed in.

And then a tall man in a top hat stepped forward. Ben hadn't noticed him before. His clothes seemed completely out of place for the little town, as if he'd gotten off the train at the wrong station. Ben edged through the crowd to Mrs. Jester's side and asked, "Who's that?"

"Felix Bowles, the town banker. Got more money than he knows what to do with."

Bowles had taken center stage in the little torchlit drama, holding up his hands for silence. "If this man can do what he says, it will be truly amazing. I, for one, am willing to pay for an extra hour on Sunday. And I'll put up the money for everyone in Waycliff Station—all five hundred dollars!"

A cheer went up from the crowd, and Wisdom and the banker shook hands. Ben decided his stay in the town might turn out to be more interesting than he'd expected.

That night in the saloon there was much conversation about Dr. Wisdom and his bizarre offer. Some thought he was downright crazy,

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but the barkeeper, a muscular young man named Matt Audrey, figured it wasn't costing them anything to find out.

"If old Bowles wants to waste five hundred bucks, I figure we should let him," he said.

"Has Wisdom ever proposed anything like this before?" Ben wondered.

"No, he's been content to sell his snake oil till now."

"That's a cute little gal he travels with. They married?"

Matt Audrey shrugged. "They're gettin' to it. She turned up a few months back and has been with him ever since. I guess he hits all the small towns in this part of the territory. Everything west of Dodge City."

"What are you going to do Sunday during your extra hour?"

"I'd like to open up the bar and give everybody a free drink, but the minister would never stand for that."

Ben paid for his drink and wandered outside. There was an autumn chill in the air, with a breeze sweeping down from the distant mountains. But the sky was clear and he could see stars everywhere. On the way back to Mrs. Jester's, he passed Dr. Wisdom's wagon. There were voices inside, but they were too faint for him to understand the words.

In the morning, he and Oats took a ride around town, stopping at the blacksmith's to have a shoe repaired. It was just before noon when they reached the railroad tracks and Ben saw Dr. Wisdom's woman Katie standing there as if waiting for the train. "Going somewhere?" he asked.

She smiled at him and tugged the Mexican shawl around her shoulders. "No, just out for a stroll."

"Do you get an extra hour tomorrow, too, or just the townsfolk?"

She studied him before she replied, perhaps weighing the amount of sarcasm in his question. Finally she decided to ignore it completely and ask one of her own. "You're new here, aren't you? I don't remember seeing you before."

"I'm just a cowhand resting between cattle drives. Name's Ben Snow."

"Funny thing—you wear those pistols like a gunfighter."

"I've been told that before."

In the distance they could see the approaching train. It slowed when the engineer saw them, but Katie shook her head and waved it on. "Right on time," she observed. "High noon."

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"Don't they even have a station here?"

"Just this little shed for waiting. You flag down the train if you want it and buy your ticket on board. They can't afford to pay a stationmaster in a town this small."

"Do you and Doc Wisdom ever go anywhere on a train?"

"No, it's just the wagon for us. Someday, though—someday he's goin' to hit it big."

"Maybe tomorrow."

She glanced at him. "Maybe."

That evening Sheriff Spofford came to visit Ben at the boarding house. It was just after dinner and Ben was relaxing on the front porch before the night air turned cool. "Mr. Ben Snow," the sheriff greeted him. "That right?"

"That's me."

"Glad to have you stayin' here for a few weeks. Anything special bring you to this part of the territory?"

"Just seemed like a peaceful place," Ben told him.

"See, we aim to keep it that way." Spofford hitched up his gun belt. "We gotta be extra careful because there's no telegraph line through here yet. If we had a decent train station, the railroad would have supplied one, but we ain't. So we don't hear about all the crime and bank robberies and such. Unless the train stops to let someone off, we don't hear much of anything."

"Sometimes that's best."

"Sure, sometimes. But I got me to thinkin' about that extra hour tomorrow noon. Maybe some stranger might use it to try robbin' Mr. Bowles's bank."

Ben merely smiled at him. "I didn't notice any strangers around today."

The sheriff's hand brushed lightly against the butt of his gun. "Well, you keep your eyes open, Mr. Snow. If you see anything suspicious, you just let me know. And I'll sure as hell keep my eyes open, too."

On Sunday morning after breakfast, Mrs. Jester asked, "You goin' over to church?" She was dressed surprisingly flashy in a bright-red dress.

Ben hadn't thought about it, but he could see it was the thing to do. "I guess I will," he decided.

"Then take off your guns. No one wears guns to church."

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He grinned at her. "You remind me of my mother."

The minister was a dour-looking man around fifty, with eyes that were cold as gun-metal. Mrs. Jester introduced him to Ben as the Reverend Dixon. He was new to the town, Ben gathered, but his sermon left no doubt as to his willingness to speak out on issues.

"You foolish people—you are children of God but you allow yourselves to be seduced by a serpent. And what does he promise you? Eternal life? Freedom from disease? Worldly wealth? No, he promises you nothing but an extra hour in the day, as if he could stop the sun and moon! And for that you would sell your souls. Beware—beware my children of God! Satan does not come amongst us with horns or hoofs! No, he comes today in a wagonload of promises!"

Neither Dr. Wisdom nor Katie was in the church, and when the services were over there was no sign of them on the street outside. It was nearly noon already and the townspeople were more interested in them than in what Reverend Dixon had said.

"How will we know?" one woman asked. "Will the clocks all stop?"

Felix Bowles, the banker, was leaving church and he answered her. "The train, dear lady. The noon train is due in seven minutes and it's never late unless the weather is bad."

And so they waited. Everyone waited. Even Reverend Dixon came out to wait with them.

"It's noon," Matt Audrey, the barkeep, said at last.

No train came.

"Your watch is fast," someone said.

But they waited another five minutes and still no train came.

Finally people began drifting home. Some of them commented on how still the air was. Ben Snow walked up to Reverend Dixon and asked, "What do you think? Is it a miracle?"

"More likely the devil's work."

As Ben walked away, he noticed the sheriff standing in the shadow of the blacksmith's shop, watching him.

By some unspoken agreement, the people of Waycliff Station began gathering near the railroad tracks as the next hour approached. Ben lingered a bit behind them, like the outsider he was. He glanced at the sunlit front of the blacksmith's shop but Sheriff Spofford was now nowhere to be seen.

"Here she comes!" Felix Bowles shouted as a little puff of smoke appeared on the horizon. It was indeed the noon train, running exactly one hour late by every clock in Waycliff Station.

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As the train slowed and the engineer waved, several people shouted, "What time is it?"

"Twelve o'clock!" he yelled back. "We're right on schedule."

"He did it," Mrs. Jester said, a touch of awe in her voice. "He really did it. We had a whole extra hour and nobody did anything with it."

Ben smiled to himself as he walked back down the dusty street. The saloon was open now and business was brisk. People wanted to talk about what had happened, to analyze and explain it. But he had other things on his mind. When he reached Dr. Wisdom's wagon he glanced about to make sure no one was watching, then lifted the back flap and ducked inside. He had only the vaguest notion of what he was searching for, but within five minutes he'd found it. Hidden away under the bedding was a week-old Dodge City newspaper with the banner headline: RAILROAD TYRANNY!

He skimmed quickly through the article and stuffed the paper under his shirt. Then he slipped out of the wagon and headed back toward the boarding house. He was almost there when he saw Dr. Wisdom walking down the center of the street toward him. Wisdom must have seen him come out of the wagon.

Ben continued on, walking slowly. The scene reminded him of countless gunfights he'd seen on the streets of western towns, except that he wasn't armed and he certainly hoped Wisdom wasn't. When they were about twenty feet apart, Wisdom said, "What were you doin' in my wagon, mister?"

"Catching up on my newspaper reading," Ben replied, watching the man's hands for any sudden movement.

Wisdom started to respond, his face flushed with anger, when the sound of a single shot cut the afternoon air. Ben crouched defensively as Wisdom grabbed at his chest and went down.

No second shot followed. The street was empty. Ben ran to the man and turned him over. He was dead. The bullet had gone through his heart.

"Stay right there, Snow!" a voice shouted. "Move and you're a dead man!"

He looked up to see Sheriff Spofford coming out of the alley by the blacksmith's shop. He had a sixgun aimed at Ben's head.

"You can *see* I didn't kill him," Ben protested. "I don't have a gun on me!"

Spofford had taken him to the sheriff's office next to the church,

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marching him down the dusty street at gunpoint while others came to remove the body. The only visible grief at Dr. Wisdom's death came from Katie, who ran out of the saloon to sob over his fallen body. Others came to stare, but they said nothing. Instead they eyed Ben as if already certain of his guilt.

"I know all about gunfighters," the sheriff told him. "You carry those little Derringers up your sleeve or in your boot."

"Go ahead, search me."

"Don't worry, I will."

But when the search yielded no gun, Spofford wasn't ready to give up. "You might have dropped it someplace, or passed it to that gal when she came running out of the saloon."

"Sheriff, I heard the shot that killed him. It sounded like the crack of a carbine to me."

"I don't know about that. You were standin' there in the street with him, and it sure looked to me like you shot him."

"Why? Because I'm a stranger?"

The sheriff squinted through half closed eyes. "I got an old Wanted poster for Billy the Kid. Looks something like you."

"News travels slow to Waycliff Station. Billy the Kid is dead."

"So they say." Spofford thought about it another minute and then shifted tactics. "What's this newspaper I found inside your shirt? Where'd it come from?"

"Dodge City, originally. I'd just found it in Wisdom's wagon. If you read it, you'll find out what happened with that extra hour."

"This is about the railroads," the sheriff said, picking up the newspaper.

"Exactly. Today at noon, New York time, the American railroads created four new time zones, replacing the fifty regional time zones that covered the states and territories. Some places gained time, other places lost it—anywhere from a few seconds to an hour or more. There's a great debate about whether or not people should allow the railroads to dictate their time, but apparently most places plan to go along with it. You can see from the map they printed that Waycliff Station gained an hour's time."

Spofford squinted at Ben. "What could Wisdom hope to gain by making us think it was part of his magic? We'd have learned the truth before long. It's a wonder someone didn't know it already."

"The town has no telegraph, Sheriff, it has a reputation for being cut off from everything. But Wisdom wasn't taking any chances. He

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had Katie down at the tracks yesterday noon, just in case the train dropped off an announcement of some sort."

"Got any ideas who killed him?"

"You know *I* didn't, so turn me loose."

Spofford thought about it. "The slug that killed Wisdom came out his back, at a lower position than the entrance wound. So he was probably shot from above, and probably with something more powerful than a Derringer or even a six-shooter. I guess I could take a chance that you're innocent. But if you try anything funny, remember I'll be watchin'."

When Ben walked into the saloon a few minutes later, Matt Audrey set up drinks on the bar. "Good work, Snow! We all heard how you got the best of that swindler!"

"I didn't kill him."

"No matter. You exposed him and now he's dead. The town thinks you're a hero."

Ben shook his head. "I'm no hero."

Audrey started to say more, but Ben caught a glimpse of Wisdom's girl Katie slipping out the back door. He decided any investigation had to start with her. He found her with one of the wagon horses, unhitched and saddled. "Going somewhere?" he asked.

She turned cold eyes on him. "You're the one who killed Artie."

"Was that his name?"

"Artie Wilcox. The Dr. Wisdom was just for show."

"I guess most people figured as much. But I didn't kill him."

"I don't care. I loved him—he was going to marry me. I suppose I knew he'd end up dead in the street somewhere. Men like Artie don't die in bed."

"He was a swindler, wasn't he? A con man?"

"Sure. But he put together a pretty fair act. All that magic stuff with the torches, and the card tricks. He taught me a lot. But I begged him to forget that damned wagon and just put together an act for dance halls." She tightened a strap on the saddle angrily. "But he had to be on the move. I don't think he was happy unless he was out in the open air, giving his pitch and talking as many townsfolk as he could out of their money."

"What about this railroad business with the time zones?"

"It was another one of his schemes. We were in Dodge City a week ago when he saw the newspaper story about what the railroads planned to do. He figured it would be a great trick to find a little

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place that didn't know about the time change and con the people into believing he could sell them extra hours. We'd both been here to Waycliff Station before and we agreed it was the perfect place. Sometimes I think the folks around here don't even know Garfield was assassinated two years ago!"

"But Wisdom didn't sell those five hundred hours—he gave them away. Or at least the banker was going to pay the whole thing."

"That was just to convince the folks he could do it. He was working his con on one person—I don't know who—and there was a lot of money involved. He was supposed to collect the money this afternoon and we'd be gone before anyone realized about the new time zones."

"You're heading out now?" he asked as she climbed into the saddle. The wagon horse seemed uncomfortable with the bit in its mouth.

"I sure am. I don't want that narrow-eyed sheriff deciding I was an accomplice to any swindle and slappin' me in jail." She paused with her hand on the reins. "How come *you* knew about the railroads changing the time? Did you read it somewhere?"

"Not until I found that Dodge City newspaper in your wagon. But if Wisdom really was doing something supernatural, making time stand still for an hour, you'd expect the sun would stand still, too. When I passed the blacksmith's shop shortly after Wisdom's magic hour began, I saw Sheriff Spofford standing in its shadow. Later in the hour, the sun was hitting the front of the same shop. I figured if the sun's position was different, that meant time hadn't stopped at all. That's when I decided to take a look in your wagon."

She nodded. "Congratulations. I'll be on my way."

But before she could spur the horse on, Sheriff Spofford appeared again, blocking the mouth of the alley. "You ain't goin' anywhere just yet, Miss."

"Out of my way!" she shouted, and guided the horse as if she meant to run him down. Spofford's arm shot up and grabbed the reins with one hand, pulling her from the saddle with the other. She fought him, but he was much too strong for her. Ben could have gone to her aid, though he knew the sheriff wouldn't hesitate to use his gun if pressed. He decided to do nothing for the moment.

"Sorry, little lady, but no one leaves town till we get to the bottom of this shootin'."

"I didn't kill him!"

"I just heard you tellin' Snow about a plot to swindle someone."

"But I don't know who!"

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"Maybe the swindle worked and you're lightin' out with the money."

"You can search me if you think that!"

"Maybe I will."

"Sheriff—"

"Stay outta this, Snow! I'll get Mrs. Jester to help me."

They trooped down to the boarding house and Mrs. Jester was given the task of searching Katie while the sheriff went through her saddlebags. They found nothing except clothing and a few small possessions. The only money was a little more than five dollars in her pocket.

"I didn't want anything of Artie's," she told them. "I'm not a thief. The only thing I was taking was the horse. I figured I could get to another town and sell it for some extra money."

"You'd better just stay around here another day," the sheriff told her.

She was wrapped in one of Mrs. Jester's robes while the landlady finished inspecting her clothing, finally reporting, "There's no money except that five dollars. I guess she's telling the truth." She dumped Katie's clothes unceremoniously at her feet. It was then Ben's eye caught something amidst the small pile of her possessions. She had a few items of makeup, probably for her part in Wisdom's act, that she carried in a cloth bag. The rough bleached cloth reminded Ben of the sort of bag banks used to store and ship silver dollars and other coins. He picked it up and turned it over. On the other side was printed WAYCLIFF STATION BANK.

"What's that?" the sheriff asked.

"My makeup," Katie replied.

Ben looked at her. "Where'd you get the bag?"

"From the bank, one time when I was here before."

"Felix Bowles gave it to you?"

"The banker, yes, I guess that's his name."

Ben nodded. "The banker's the only one in this town with enough money to interest a con man. And we already know Bowles was gullible where Dr. Wisdom was concerned."

"You're right," Spofford agreed. "Let's go talk with Mr. Bowles."

The banker was at his home on the edge of town when Ben and the sheriff reached it. He greeted them in a parlor more suited to a home back east, where muddy boots were not likely to track across

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the oriental rugs. "What can I do for you fellows?" he asked, eyeing Ben with some distaste.

Before the sheriff could speak, Ben said quickly, "We understand you gave Dr. Wisdom a large sum of money."

The banker flushed slightly. "I didn't *give* him the money. It was more of an investment. He had a couple of ideas that interested me."

"Like selling you extra time?" Ben speculated. "Enabling you to make a killing on the stock exchange?"

Felix Bowles seemed to sag visibly. "I suppose there's no harm in telling it now that he's dead. He explained it all in great detail, how the new time zones imposed by the railroads had so confused the nation that it might be possible to make a profit on the New York Stock Exchange. A mining company was about to announce a large gold strike near Salt Lake City. Once the strike was confirmed, Wisdom thought he could use the extra hour to telegraph an order to a New York broker to buy shares in the stock before the market closed that day."

"There's no telegraph in Waycliff Station," the sheriff pointed out.

"That's why he needed my money to take back to Dodge City. He did this business with the extra hour as a demonstration, to prove that a whole town could be fooled by the time change."

"How much did you give him?"

"Ten thousand dollars," the banker croaked. "Did you find it on him?"

"No," Sheriff Spofford replied.

"It must be in his wagon."

"I've already searched the wagon."

"That girl—"

"I had her searched, too." The sheriff paused and asked, "Mr. Bowles, why didn't you come forward and report this matter as soon as you learned of Wisdom's shooting?"

"I didn't want my wife to know. She's upstairs, ill. She's always said I was foolish with money—"

"You'd simply abandon that much money?"

"I planned to come see you about it later."

Unless he was just a gullible fool, Ben could see that his story didn't hold water. Deceiving five hundred people in a town cut off from civilization as to the time of day was a great deal different from fooling people in cities like Salt Lake or Dodge, linked by telegraph with the east coast. Maybe he hadn't worried about the

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ten thousand dollars because he'd already retrieved it after he shot Wisdom for swindling him.

But Ben kept his thoughts to himself. When they left the banker's home, Spofford said only, "It looks like whoever shot Wisdom might have done us all a favor."

"Maybe," Ben agreed.

When the sheriff returned to his office, Ben went back to the boarding house. He unlocked the door to his room and went inside with a feeling of dissatisfaction. Trouble seemed to follow him like a restless hawk waiting to pounce, and he knew he should be moving on before something else happened. Waycliff Station hadn't been quite as peaceful as he'd hoped.

He buckled on his gunbelt and got his long lightweight duster out of the wardrobe. A breeze was coming up and he'd need it riding across the arid plains. Then he picked up his saddlebags and was packing the rest of his gear when he felt something small and hard in the duster pocket.

It was a cartridge case, too small for his Colt .45s—more the size for rifle or carbine bullets.

A noise from the street attracted him to the window. Nearly at the spot where Wisdom had died, the Reverend Dixon had intercepted Katie leading her horse. He was shouting something at her and she looked as if she needed help. Ben left his duster and the saddlebags on the bed and ran downstairs.

As he reached them, Katie was shouting, "That's not true! He was going to marry me next week in Dodge City! You worry so much about sin and your town's full of it! What about the person who murdered Artie?"

The minister, red-faced and fuming, told her, "Get out of my town, you sinful woman!"

"That's just what I'm trying to do—the sheriff won't let me!"

Dixon was pulling her by one arm when Ben grabbed him. "Let her go, Reverend. Spofford's given her enough trouble already."

"Who told you to interfere? You're a stranger here."

"I'm only trying to—" Ben's words were cut off by a sudden glint of sunlight on metal, glimpsed from the corner of his right eye. His reflexes took over and he whirled, pulling the .45 from his holster as he thumbed the hammer and fired up at the window of his own room.

Katie screamed and then he was running back toward the boarding house, through the front door, and up the stairs.

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She was lying there by the window, wearing his duster that was now soaked with her blood. The carbine was beside her on the floor.

"Mrs. Jester," he said, trying to lift her.

"Never mind." There was blood in her mouth. "I killed him. And I wanted to kill her, too. I wasn't after you. He was goin' to marry her. After all his promises, he was goin' to marry her."

"I'll get help," he told her, turning to see Sheriff Spofford enter the room.

"Don't bother. It'll save the cost of a trial," Spofford said.

Ben stared at him. They managed to get her on the bed, but she died five minutes later.

It was the saloon keeper, Matt Audrey, who expressed the town's opinion to Ben Snow after the sheriff had refused to press charges in the shooting. "You killed Mrs. Jester," he said. "There never was a more popular woman in Waycliff Station than Mrs. Jester."

"I know," Ben said, "and I'm sorry she's dead. If I'd have known it was her in that window, maybe I wouldn't have fired so quickly."

"Who'd you think it was?"

"I didn't think. I only saw the glint of sunlight on that rifle barrel sticking out my window. Of course I noticed the good view of the street the first day I was up there, and again just before the shooting today. The sheriff told me Wisdom was shot from above, but I didn't connect it with my room till I found a cartridge case in the pocket of my duster. She wore that both times over her red dress so she wouldn't be spotted in the window. Then she dropped the ejected cartridge into the pocket and forgot about it. Once I realized the killer had used my room, I should have known it had to be Mrs. Jester. I kept my door locked and she was the only one likely to have a duplicate key."

"Don't matter what she did," Audrey told him. "You shouldn't have shot her. If she killed Wisdom, she was a hero—like I thought you were, earlier."

"Her motive was more down-to-earth. Wisdom had been romancing her on his previous monthly visits. He even convinced her that Katie was only part of the act and meant nothing to him. Then he told her on Saturday that he was getting married. She went up to my room after church this noon and shot him in the street, just at his moment of triumph when you all thought he'd succeeded in stopping time. She was trying to kill Katie, too, when I shot her."

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But Matt Audrey and the others didn't want to hear it. They only wanted him gone.

He rode out of town with Katie. When they had gone for perhaps two miles, he told her, "Your horse is still having trouble with that bit. Maybe I should take a look at it."

"You don't have to," she said quickly, but Ben was already out of the saddle, prying open the horse's mouth. There was a small package wrapped in oilskin and attached to the bit.

"Well, what's this?"

"Damn you!" she shouted. "That's mine!"

"More likely it's Felix Bowles's missing money. That was quite a trick, getting the horse to keep it in its mouth while you were searched. I figured if you had the empty sack, you had the money too, somewhere."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Let's talk about it while we ride," said Ben as he climbed back in his saddle.

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THE DREADFUL DAY OF JUDGMENT

by RUTH RENDELL

There were four of them working in the cemetery. They were employed by the city corporation—to do what? Even the foreman was vague about their duties, which had not been very precisely specified. Not to clear the central part, certainly, for that would have

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been a task not for four but for four hundred. And a wild-life sanctuary, for which purpose it was designated, must be wild. To tidy it, then, to remove the worst signs of vandalism, to carry away such gravestones as had fallen, to denude certain of the many winding paths of the intrusive bramble and ivy and nettle. When they asked the foreman whether this should be done or that, he would say to use their own judgment, he couldn't be sure, he would find out. But he never did.

Sometimes an official from the corporation came and viewed the work and nodded and disappeared into the hut with the foreman to drink tea. As the winter came on, the official appeared less often, and the foreman said it was a hopeless task, they needed more men, but the corporation could no longer afford to spend the money, they must just do the best they could.

The hut was just inside the main gates. The foreman had a plan of the cemetery pinned to the wall next to Gilly's calendar of the girl in the transparent nightdress. He had a kettle and a spirit stove, but the cups and the teapot had been brought by Marlon, who got them from his mother. The hut was always hot and smelly and smoky. The foreman chain-smoked and so did Marlon, although he was so young, and everywhere in the hut were saucers full of ash and cigarette stubs. One day Gilly, who didn't smoke, brought into the hut a tin can he had found in an open vault. The foreman and Marlon seemed pleased to have a new, clean ashtray, for they never considered emptying the others but let them fill up and spill about the floor.

"Marlon'd be scared stiff if he knew where that came from," said John. "He'd die of fright."

But Gilly only laughed. He found everything about the cemetery funny, even the soldiers' graves, the only well tended ones, that the Imperial War Graves Commission still looked after. In the beginning he had amused himself by jumping out on Marlon from behind a monument or a pillared tomb, but the foreman, lethargic as he was, had stopped that because Marlon was not quite as they were, being backward and not able to read or write much.

The main gates hung between what the foreman called stone posts but which John alone knew were Corinthian columns. A high wall surrounded the cemetery, which was of many acres, and the periphery of it, a wide space just inside the wall, had been cleared long before and turfed and planted with trees that were still tiny. This

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was to be a public park for the townsfolk. It was the center, the deep heart of the place, once the necropolis for this mercantile city, that was to be left for the birds and such small animals who would venture in and stay.

Many species of bird already nested in the ilexes and the laurels, the elms and the thin, silver-trunked birch trees. Crows with wings like black fans, woodpeckers whose tap-tap-tapping could be heard from the almost impenetrable depths, little birds which even John couldn't name and which crept rather than hopped over the lichen on the fallen stones.

It was silent in there but for the rare rustle of wings or the soft crack of a decayed twig dropping. The city lay below, all around, but in winter it was often masked by fog, and it was hard to believe that thousands lived down there and worked and scurried in glare and noise. Their forbears' tombs stood in rows or gathered in clusters or jostled each other haphazardly: domed follies, marble slabs, granite crosses, broken columns, draped urns, simple stones, all overgrown and shrouded and half obscured. Not a famous name among them, not a memorable title, only the obscure dead, forgotten, abandoned, capable now of nothing more than to decree a hush.

The silence was violated only by Gilly's talk. He had one topic of conversation, but that one was inexhaustible and everything recalled him to it. A name on a tomb, a scrap of verse on a gravestone, a pair of sparrows, the decorously robed statue of an angel.

"Bit of all right, that one," he would say, stroking the stone flesh of a weeping muse, his hands so coarse and calloused that John wondered how any real woman could bear them to touch her. Or, lifting the ivy from a grave where lay a matron who had married three times, "Couldn't get enough of it, could she?" And these reflections led him into endless reminiscences of the women he had had, those he now possessed, and anticipations of those awaiting him in the future.

Nothing stayed him. Not the engraved sorrow of parents mourning a daughter dead at seventeen, not the stone evocations of the sufferings of those dead in childbirth. Some of the vaults had been despoiled and left open, and he would penetrate them, descending subterranean stairs, shouting up to John and Marlon from the depths that here was a good place to bring a girl. "Be okay in the summer. There's shelves here—make a good bed, they would. Proper little boudoir."

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John often regretted the thing he had done which made Gilly admire him. It had been on his first day there. He knew, even before he had done it, that this was to show them he was different from them, to make it clear from the start that he was a laborer only because there was no other work obtainable for such as he. He wanted them to know he had been to a university and was a qualified teacher. The shame and humiliation of being forced to take this unskilled work ate into his soul. They must understand his education had fitted him for something higher. But it had been a foolish vanity.

There had been nothing in the deep cavity any more but stones and dead leaves. But he had jumped in and held up a big pitted stone and cried ringingly: "That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone that did the first murder!"

Gilly stared. "You make that up yourself?"

"Shakespeare," he said. "*Hamlet*," and the awe on Gilly's unformed pug-nosed face made him go on, excited with success, a braggart in a squalid pit. "Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing. Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth? And smelt so? pah!"

Marlon had gone white, his face peaked between the falls of thin yellow hair. He wore a heavy blue garment, a kind of anorak, but it gave him a medieval look standing there against the chapel wall, an El Greco sky flowing above its tower, purple and black and rushing in scuds above this northern Toledo. But Gilly was laughing, begging John to go on, and John went on, playing to the groundlings, holding the stone aloft.

"Alas, poor Yorick . . ." until at last he flung it from him with the ham actor's flourish, and up on the path again was being clapped on the back by Gilly and told what a brain he'd got. And Gilly was showing what he was and what all that had meant to him by demanding to have that bit again, the bit about the lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.

Marlon hadn't laughed or congratulated him. Bewildered, frightened by the daring of it and the incomprehensibility, he fumbled to light a fresh cigarette, another of the sixty he would smoke that day. Cigarettes were all he had, a tenuous hold on that real world in which his mother, sixteen years before, had named him after a famous actor. The smoke flowed from his loose lips. In a way, but for that cigarette, he might have been an actor in a miracle play perhaps or in a chorus of madmen. On that day, as on all the others that followed, he walked behind them as they made their way back

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through the shaded aisles, under the leather-leaved ilexes, between the little houses of the dead.

In the hut there was tea to be drunk, and then home, the foreman off to his semidetached and his comfortable wife, Marlon to his mother and stuffy rooms and television commercials, John to his bedsit, Gilly (as John, the favored, was now privileged to be told) to the arms of a casino owner's wife whose husband lacked a grave-digger's virility.

The chapel was built of yellowish-grey stones. It had an octagonal nave, and on its floor thin, hairlike grass grew up between the flags. To one of its sides was attached a square tower, surmounted at each angle by a thin ornamented spire. The four spires, weather-worn, corroded, stained, were like four needles encrusted with rust. The workmen used the chapel as a repository for pieces of broken stone and iron rails. Even Gilly's bullying could not make Marlon go inside. He was afraid of Gilly and the foreman, but not so afraid as he was of the echoing chapel and of the dust beneath his feet.

Gilly said, "What'd you do, Marl, if you turned round now and it wasn't me here but a skeleton in a shroud?"

"Leave him alone," said John, and when they were alone in the nave, "You know he's a bit retarded."

"Big words you use, John. I call him cracked. D'you know what he said to me yesterday? All them graves are going to open up and the dead bodies come out. On some special day that's going to be. What day's that then? I said. But he only wobbled his head."

"The dreadful Day of Judgment," said John, "when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed."

"Wouldn't suit me, that. Some of them old skulls'd blush a bit if I told them what I'd been getting up to last night. The secrets of all hearts? Open some of them up and I'd have a good many blokes on my track, not to mention that old git, you-know-who. Break his bloody roulette wheel, he would."

"Over your head, no doubt," said John.

"A short life and a randy one, that's what I say." They came out into the cold, pale sunlight.

"Here, have a shufty at this. Angelina Clara Bowyer, 1816 to 1839. Same age as what you are, mate, and she'd had five kids! Must have worn her old man out."

"It wore her out," said John, and he seemed to see her with her piled plaited hair and her long straight dress and the consumption

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in her face. He saw the young husband mourning among those five bread-and-butter-fed children, the crepe on his hat, the black coat. Under a sky like this, the sun a white puddle in layered cloud, he came with the clergyman and the mourners and the coffin-bearers to lay her in the earth. The flowers withered in the biting wind—or did they bring flowers to funerals then? He didn't know, and not knowing broke the vision and brought him back to the clink of spade against granite, the smell of Marlon's cigarette, Gilly talking, talking, as boringly as an old woman of her aches and pains only he was talking of sex.

They always stopped work at four now the dusk came early. "Nights are drawing in," said the foreman, brewing tea, filling up with dog ends the can Gilly had found in the grave.

"When'll we get it over with?" Marlon faltered, coming close to the stove, coughing a little.

"Depends on what we've got to get over," said the foreman. "Digging a bit here, clearing a bit there. My guess is that council fellow'll come round one of these days and say, That's it, lads, now you can leave it to the squirrels."

Gilly was looking at his calendar, turning over the November nightdress girl to the December Santa Claus girl. "If I had my way, they'd level it all over, the center bit, and put grass down, make the whole place a park. That's healthy, that is. Somewhere a young kid could take his girl. Lover's Lane Park, that'd be a good name. I'd like to see real birds there, not them bloody crows."

"You can't do that," said Marlon. "There's the dead people in there."

"So what? There was dead people round the edges, but they took them up. They done something—what they call it, John?"

"They deconsecrated the ground."

"Hear what John says? He's educated, he knows."

Marlon got up, the cigarette clinging to his lip. "You mean they dug them up? There was others and they dug them up?"

"'Course they did. You didn't think they was under there, did you?"

"Then where'll they be when the Day comes? How'll they lift up the stones and come out?"

"Here," said the foreman, "that's enough of that, young Marlon. I don't reckon your mum'd better take you to church no more if that's what you come out with."

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"They must come out, they must come and judge!" Marlon cried, and then the foreman told him sharply to shut up, for even he could be shaken by this sort of thing, with the darkness crowding in on the hut, and the heart of the cemetery a black mound horned by the spires of the chapel.

John wondered what church Marlon went to—that of some strange sect, perhaps. Or was it only his incomplete brain that distorted the accepted meaning of the Day of Judgment into this version of his own? The resentful dead, the judging dead, lying censorious in the earth.

For his part, he had at first seen the cemetery as no more than a wooded knoll and the stones no more than granite outcroppings. It was not so now. The names in inscriptions, studied by him quietly or derisively read out by Gilly, evoked images of their bearers. James Calhoun Stokes, 1798–1862, Merchant of this City; "Upright in all his dealings, he stood firm to meet his Maker." Gilly had an obscene rendering of that, of course. Thomas Charles Macpherson, 1802–79, Master Builder; "Blest are the Pure in Heart." Lucy Matilda Osborne, 1823–96; "Her submissive duty to her husband and devotion to her sons was exceeded only by her pious adoration of her God." John saw them in cutaway coats, in bombazine gowns, or night-capped on their deathbeds.

But Marlon saw them as a magisterial procession. Listening, watching, waiting perhaps for the ultimate outrage. "What a load of old cobblers! You'll be down there yourself soon, all the fags you get through in a day." Gilly sat on a toppled stone, laughing. He had been telling John more about the casino man's wife, trying to find among the statues they had piled up one whose figure might be comparable to hers. Britannias, muses, embodiments of virtues or arts, they lay prostrate, their blank grey or bronze faces all staring upward at the clouded sky.

"What are we going to do with them?" Marlon said in the voice that was as desperate when he asked about trivialities as when he gave his prophetlike cries.

"Ask the foreman," said John.

"He won't bloody know." And Gilly lifted onto his lap the bronze that was nearly nude, just veiled over her loins with metal drapery. "Randy old devil he must have been, that Sidney George Whatsit, having her sitting on top of him when he was dead."

"He was a historian, the plaque says," said John. "She's supposed

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to be Clio, the Muse of History. That's why she's got a scroll in her hand." And then, because he was bored with Gilly and afraid for Marlon, "Let's stick them all in the chapel till the council guy comes."

But Gilly refused to abandon the huge joke of caressing the bronze. Every reachable inch of her anatomy was examined until, suddenly, he jumped up, leaving her to roll into one of the muddy ruts the truck had made, and ran up to the pillared monument from whose dome she had toppled. He stood inside, a satyr, John thought, in a temple defiled by northern rains. He threw up his arms.

"I said you was a randy old goat, Sidney, and so you was! I had a bird called Clio once myself, real hot stuff." His shouts punctured the thick greyness, the silence, the fog-textured air. He leapt down the steps, kicking a gravestone here, a marble urn there, and perched on a broken column. "Come out, all the lot of you, if you want, only you can't because you're bloody dead!"

And then Marlon made a horrible sound, the moan a man makes in sleep, in a nightmare, when he thinks he is screaming. He got into the cab of the truck and hunched there.

"You stupid bastard." John picked up Marlon's fallen cigarette packet, brushed the grit off it. "D'you have to act like a kid of ten?"

"Got to get some sort of kick out of this dump," Gilly said sulkily. "Dead-end hole."

"Well, that's what it is, isn't it? What d'you expect? A bar? Booze? Bring on the dancing girls?"

Gilly started to laugh again, picked up his muse again. "I wouldn't mind this dancing girl. Don't reckon they'd miss her, do you? She'd look okay in my place. I could stand her on the table."

"What for?"

"People have statues, don't they? They've got them in the town hall. It'd give my place a bit of class."

"Come on," said John, "let's stick the lot of them in the chapel. The foreman'll do his nut if he sees you going off with that. She's too big to go under your jacket."

So they piled the statues and the urns in the chapel and Gilly amused himself by shouting insults and obscenities, which the lofty walls echoed back at him, black pigeons, white doves flapping from the crannies in fear.

"What d'you do in that room of yours, John? Must be a real drag all on your own night after night. Fancy coming over to my bird's

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place? She's got a real dishy friend. We could have ourselves a ball, and I don't mean wining and dining."

No, thanks, John said, and softened his refusal by saying he had to study, which impressed Gilly. It wasn't that he was a prude so much as that the idea of association with Gilly's friends offended some snobbish delicacy in his nature, some fastidiousness. Better the speechless company of James Calhoun Stokes and Angelina Bowyer and the historian—better, in the evenings, the dreams of them and the wonderings about their lost lives. Though, in refusing, he thought it likely that brash, insensitive Gilly might not take his no for an answer but turn up one night with his girl and that other girl to rout him out. He feared it a little, but not with Marlon's obsessional dread of threats from another world.

When at last Gilly did come, it was on a cold moonlit night, and he came alone.

"I'm going to split," said Gilly, "I'm getting the hell out. All good things come to an end. You can tell the foreman in the morning, okay? I'm going south. I've got a girl in London, worships the ground I tread on, poor cow. She'll take me in. But that's between you and I, right?"

"But why?"

"He's found out, her old man, and I reckon he'll have his heavies out gunning for me. He's beat her up—bunch of bloody gangsters that lot are. I'll miss her." The tears stood in his eyes, and John stared, amazed, confounded. "Poor cow," said Gilly, the epithet an endearment, a caress.

"D'you want me to come to the station with you?"

"No need for that. I only come in to tell you to tell the foreman. Anyway, I got something to do first, get that statue, that Clio. The train don't go till eleven, and I want her." He turned half away. "For a souvenir like. She's the dead spitting image."

"You'd go into the cemetery tonight, for *that?*"

"Like I said, I want her." His eyes, glazed, held a pathetic hunger. Of love, in those bare words, he had expressed all he knew how to. On lechery only he was articulate. "It's moonlight," he said. "I've got a torch. I'll climb the wall."

"Goodbye, Gilly," said John. "Good luck."

In the morning the sky was coppery—grey above, reddish on the horizon where the sun hung. The Winter Solstice had come.

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"It's like the end of the world," said Marlon.

The foreman came in, rubbing his hands. "Going to have snow before the day's over. Gilly's late." John told him Gilly wasn't coming in. He didn't tell him why not, and he expected an outburst. But the foreman only stuck out his lip and put the kettle on and helped himself to one of Marlon's cigarettes.

"No loss, that," he said. "We shan't miss him. And if I'm not much mistaken we'll all be laid off by tonight when this dump's snowed up. You'll be able to get yourselves dug in nice for Christmas, lads."

Marlon showed no inclination to leave the stuffy warmth of the hut, where the foreman now had a brazier of coke, for the raw air and yellowed dimness of the cemetery. But the foreman wanted to be rid of them, to be on his own, to be idle and warm in peace. He took down Gilly's calendar and pushed it among the glowing coke, and the last John saw of it was the glossy tanned body of a naked girl gyrating in the fire. They moved out into the chill of the shortest day, the foreman hurrying them along by cleaning frost off the truck's windscreen himself.

John expected trouble from the boy, so forbidding was the cemetery in the gloom and under that strange sky. But Marlon, when John had repeated several times that Gilly was not coming, when this had at last sunk in, became more cheerful and more like a normal person than John had ever seen him. He even laughed. He pushed John about in the cab, and when this made the truck swerve he hooted with laughter.

But when they had come to the center and were working on clearing the main aisle, he fell silent, though he seemed tranquil enough. All those months John had longed for peace, for a respite from Gilly's ceaseless bragging and innuendo, but now he had it he felt only uneasy. Being alone up here with Marlon had something to do with it. He despised himself for being afraid of a poor retarded boy, yet he was afraid. The thickening atmosphere was part of it, and the windless cold, and the increasing darkness like an eclipse, and the way Marlon would stand for whole minutes on end, staring vacantly, swinging his spade.

But what made him long for the snow to begin and drive them back to the hut was Marlon's new habit, now Gilly was not here to deride him, of touching the gravestones and seeming to whisper to them. That he did this reverently and cautiously did nothing to ease John's mind. It was as if he were placating the dead, assuring them that now all would be well. And John had an awareness, growing

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in intensity as the time slowly passed, that the cemetery had somehow undergone a change. For him it had been just a place to work in, later an abode of sadness and the lost past, never till now macabre. Perhaps much of this feeling was due to the strangeness of the day itself, the permanent twilight, the knowledge that in these hours the earth had turned to its ultimate distance away from the sun.

Yet it was more than that. That might account for the distortions he seemed to see, so that the tombs appeared more closely crowded and the chapel tower taller and darker, but not for his sensation that there had taken place in the cemetery since he had last seen it some upheaval and some outrage. It was when these fancies grew so strong as to make him imagine some actual physical change, the positions of the slabs and stones altered, that he looked at his watch and told Marlon they could stop now for their midday meal.

The foreman said to bring down one truckload of rubble from the chapel and then they could knock off. The sky had lightened a little, becoming uniformly livid, but still they needed the headlights on. The pale misty shafts of light probed the undergrowth and died into blackness. They parked beside the tower.

"Can you make an effort and come in?" said John, "or do I have to do it on my own?"

Marlon managed a sheepish, crafty smile. "You go first."

The rubble was heaped against the farthest side of the octagon. He saw Gilly before he got there. Gilly was lying on his back among the muses and the virgins, his head, his face, a mass of black clotted blood to which fragments and crumbs of stone adhered. Clio, memento of love, had rolled from his grasp. His eyes still stared, as if they still saw those meters-out of vengeance.

"Gilly! Gilly!" John cried, and the eight walls called back, "Gilly! Gilly!"—calling them to Marlon as he came through the tower and into the nave.

Marlon did not speak Gilly's name. He gave a great cry.

"The dead people came out! The dead people judged him! The day has come, the end of the world . . . the Day, the Day, the Day!"

From the eaves, out of the broken roof, the birds came, circling, cawing, a great rush of wings. And the echo roared like a knell. John stumbled out after Marlon, after the flying figure that cried like a prophet in the wilderness, into a whiteness that cleaned the world. In great shaggy flakes, the snow had begun to fall.

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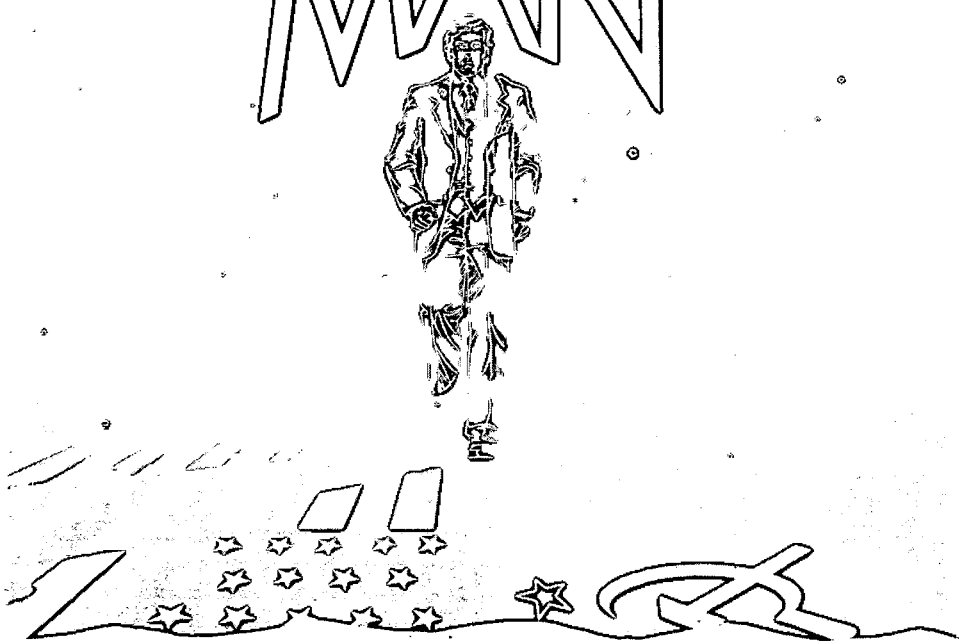
JONATHAN EVANS

THE SOLITARY MAN



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TOR BOOKS — We're Part of the Future

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a *NEW* Griswold story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"Holidays have their uses," Griswold said . . .

THE YEAR OF THE FEAST

by ISAAC ASIMOV

I am not, I hope, an irritable person, but there *are* things that irritate me, and the weekly evenings at the Union Club are the perfect occasion for getting pet peeves off one's chest. It contributes to mental health.

So I said, "I hate these holidays. They mess up the week and get in my way. The banks close, the mail stops, businesses shut down. Who needs it?"

"I need it," said Baranov. "There's nothing wrong with a day off now and then."

"Hear, hear," said Jennings.

"That was the purpose at the start," I said strenuously. "With people working from dawn to dusk every day, it was nice to have an excuse to do nothing on a holiday, and, if it was a feast day, to celebrate by eating and drinking one's self into a stupor. But now there are eight-hour days that include three-hour lunches, two-day weekends, and month-long vacations. Who needs holidays, *too*."

"We do," said Baranov and Jennings in chorus.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Of course, if you're so ill-equipped for life as to hate what you do for a living, you need all the refuge you can get. As for me, I work seven days a week, fifteen hours a day, and love it. I—"

I was interrupted by something that sounded suspiciously like a Bronx cheer. I turned and found that Griswold was glaring at me

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out of the battered armchair that, over the years, had molded itself to his buttocks perfectly.

He said, "It is bad enough to live by the Protestant ethic. To flaunt it before one's betters is unforgivable." His luxuriant white eyebrows bent low over the glacial blue of his eyes.

"If one is a professional sleeper, as you are—" I began haughtily.

"Besides," said Griswold, ignoring what was intended to be the beginning of a keen analysis of his personality, "holidays have their uses."

"Uh oh," I said. "He's off." And he was.

It is generally assumed [said Griswold] that what little triumphs I have experienced in my life have been matters of several decades before, that the few memories I lay before you are records of my youth, and that I have spent my latter years as a "professional sleeper"—to repeat one of the many idiocies propounded by one or another of you three. But that is not so, and I will now tell you of something that happened only a few months ago.

It involved a friend of mine, a young black lawyer. We were having lunch together and it was clear that he was not really with me.

I said, "You seem to have your mind elsewhere, John."

"I do," he admitted. "I'm troubled by a very difficult case."

"I'd offer to help," I said, "but I know nothing about the law."

"It has nothing to do with the law as such," said John, "but with a puzzling letter I have."

"Tell me," I said.

John warmed his hands around his cup of coffee and said, "In a way, it's a romantic story—about a rich young man of excellent family and a poor but beautiful woman in a small flat in a semi-slum neighborhood. They were desperately in love, and on certain occasions the young man would manage to get away from his mansion, visit the young woman, have dinner, walk in the park, see a show, do whatever young people in love do—except that it could only be done occasionally because there could be nothing open about the relationship. They could only go where he was fairly certain not to be recognized."

"He was married, I take it."

"Yes, and he had a child. Eventually, he was to have four."

"He was never divorced, then."

John nodded. "He was still with his wife when he died and left her a widow."

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"But it was this poor young woman from the slums whom he loved?"

"Yes."

"And it never occurred to him that he might get a divorce and marry this young woman?"

"It was impossible," said John stiffly. "This was decades ago and the young woman in question was black. We're not dealing with a storybook hero but with a young man who quailed at the thought of the social ostracism that would have been his lot, or the disgrace he would bring on his family, his wife, his child. —Perhaps you remember those days before the 1960s. *I* certainly do. And to do him justice, he did offer to face it all when he found the young woman was going to bear his child. But she wouldn't consider it. She absolutely refused to be the cause of the ruin of his life."

"Well, then, what happened?"

"What could happen? As he grew older and his responsibilities became greater, he could see her fewer and fewer times—until finally the love affair was over."

"And the child?"

"It was a boy. She wouldn't consider what was then called an 'illegal operation.' Again, to do the father justice, he didn't abandon them entirely. He arranged a system of regular payments which were appropriately laundered so that they couldn't be traced to him. The young woman and the child were well taken care of in that way and the boy received a good education. Today he owns a small toy-business that has been moderately prosperous. He has a wife and three children and lives in a comfortable suburban house."

"In a way, a happy ending, then."

"Not entirely. It is the grown son, the toy manufacturer, who is my client. He grew up knowing he didn't have a father, and suffering the lack, as you might well imagine he would. His mother wouldn't talk about the past, because she was intent on minimizing the risk to the father. It was only when she was dying eight years ago that she told him the truth, so that he might know of his heritage. But she made him promise he would never turn to his father for help—never embarrass him in any way. The son promised. Then, four years later his father died."

"And now our toy manufacturer is in financial trouble?"

"Not dire trouble. But his three children are almost at college age and he wants them to have the best education possible, and can't quite afford it. College tuition fees at the top schools are enormous.

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My client feels his father's family could see to it. He asks nothing for himself—he only wants them to foot the college bills as a loan to the children, eventually to be paid back.

"I approached the family on his behalf. The current head of the family is my client's half brother. He is no villain. He sees the justice of it. He asks only for evidence that my client is really his half brother."

"And you don't have it?"

"Not quite. My client's mother destroyed all correspondence, all traces of the affair. It was true love, I suppose. However, after she died, my client, in going through her effects, came across one scrawled note that must have evaded her vigilance. That it is from him, I think, can be demonstrated by handwriting experts. However, it doesn't say enough. Under the circumstances, the father trained himself to be exceedingly cautious." John reached for his briefcase. "Here's a Xerox of the note. The original is in my office safe."

I looked at the hastily scrawled note. There was no date.

It read: "Dear Amaryllis: The rest of the world must wonder why it is so mild and beautiful considering that it is already December, but I know why. Your beauty and charm warms the whole world. I will never forget yesterday's turkey with stuffing, and sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce—and love. A small, warm, infinitely happy version of the elaborate, cold feast at home. When your child comes, he or she will be what yesterday was for and I will see that he or she is cared for. Your Strephon."

I read it twice. "What do you think it shows?"

John said, "Clearly, it was written when she was pregnant. It would be nice if I could show that the child she was bearing was my client."

"Whoever wrote this says 'your child,' not 'our child.' "

"Yes. Natural caution. He called her Amaryllis, too, and that wasn't her name. It was a masking reference to old-fashioned pastoral romance. Strephon wasn't his name, either. But the handwriting *is* his, and she had it in her possession, so that it's from him to her is a reasonable inference. And since he offered to care for the child, it's reasonable to suppose he considered it his. However, we need a date—the year at least. If I could show the letter was written in December of the year before which my client was born, he would seem the one referred to. His half brother would then put forward the money, on condition that the reason for doing so be kept quiet."

I said, "It sounds as though the dinner in the note was Thanks-

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giving. Turkey, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes—the traditional trappings."

"Unfortunately, that doesn't give us a handle. People can eat turkey any time of the year, it isn't confined to Thanksgiving. And the particular dinner referred to in the note can't be Thanksgiving. The letter is written in December and it refers to 'yesterday's turkey.' Thanksgiving takes place on the fourth Thursday in November, which means November twenty-second at the earliest, November twenty-eighth at the latest. If you talk about yesterday's turkey in December, then it's not a Thanksgiving turkey. And even if it were, it wouldn't help tell us the year."

"I have the idea that you don't need anything hard and fast, just something reasonable to justify the half brother in taking action."

"Yes, there must have been some vague knowledge within the family of the love affair, for he didn't try to send me packing. The money involved wouldn't be much to them, and just so long as he can tell himself he isn't being conned—"

"Yes, I see," I said. "In what year was your client's father born? Do you know?"

John thought a while. "It must have been 1916, because he died in 1980 at the age of 64."

"Ah," I said. "In that case, let me tell you the year in which your client was born." And I told him. "Am I right?"

He stared at me for a while, his eyes wide. "You're right. How did you do it? A wild guess?"

"Not at all. The letter told me."

"How? It doesn't tell me anything."

"Of course not. You're too young to see it. You're in your early forties, I should judge, and your client and his half brother are about your age, too. I'm a little older, so I remember a few things."

And I explained. *He* then explained to the half brother so that last week the final settlement was made. A trust fund was set up quietly for the three children who were, after all, the grandchildren of the half brother's father, and their education is secure.

Jennings said, "The letter didn't tell *me* the year the child was born."

"Or me," said Baranov. "How did you know what year the client was born?"

"You're *all* too young," said Griswold contemptuously. "Thanksgiving is set by presidential proclamation. The date isn't fixed in the

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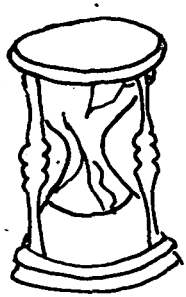
Bible or in history. It's only been the fourth Thursday in November since 1941 when F.D.R. set it at that. Before 1941, it was the *last* Thursday in November. Usually, the fourth Thursday *is* the last Thursday, but not always. When November first falls on a Thursday, the fourth Thursday is the twenty-second, but there is a fifth and last Thursday, which is the twenty-ninth. Roosevelt fixed the change to give merchants a break by making the Christmas-selling season a bit longer.

"Well, the only time that it can be December and you can still refer to 'yesterday's turkey' and mean Thanksgiving is when it is December first and Thanksgiving was on November thirtieth. Nowadays, when November thirtieth is on Thursday, Thanksgiving is on November twenty-third, the Thursday before. But prior to 1941, there could indeed be a Thanksgiving on November thirtieth. That happened in 1933, for instance—as I could calculate in my head. But the client's father was only seventeen then, and he would have been a little young for a passionate, long-running love affair. The very last time it happened was in 1939, and John's client was indeed born in 1940. The half brother was willing to accept that as sufficient."



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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Coming out of the mouth of the sack was a snake. It was not stretched to full length, but Martin guessed it at four feet. Its scales, as it twisted in the sunlight, reminded him of dusty, coarse-mesh, woven metal. It did not need to sound its warning. A timber rattler . . .

THE EATER OF DUST

by JOHN F. SUTER

Except for the terrible thing that had just happened not too far away, I saw nearly all of it.

I had come into the courthouse in the wagon with my father when he came to pay his taxes. While he went around the building to the sheriff's office, I walked up and down, trying to decide about eating the red-cheeked apple I had brought with me. It was mid-September and our trees had yielded a bounty beyond our expectation. Well might we sing of Harvest Home!

As I strolled, idly tossing the fruit, I heard an outbreak of angry voices.

I looked up. Across the road stood a short, nondescript man holding a large burlap sack. Confronting him was Bronson, the old Calvinist circuit-riding preacher.

"Ramsey!" the old man thundered. "Do you carry what I think you carry?"

The short man looked at him with faded grey eyes. His prematurely lined face was expressionless. "Preacher," he replied, "I don't know what you're thinking, so I can't answer that."

While Bronson was by no means infirm, he had taken to carrying

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a gnarled ash stick. He raised it as though he intended to poke at the sack.

"Don't you do that!" Ramsey said sharply, transferring the bag to his other hand. "I'm taking this back to my store, and you might cause me trouble."

Bronson stared at him from beneath his bushy white brows, but he lowered the stick. "Store, you say. Is it intended for the store or is it for the abomination you practice there on the day the Lord blessed and sanctified?"

Ramsey glanced down at the sack. "It's not a sacrifice, and well you know it."

"Nor is it a gift for the altar—if you have one!" the old preacher snapped.

"Now this is a poor thing," said a voice behind me. "Nature blesses us with a day of beauty above and here are two of us conjuring up a storm below."

I recognized the voice as Squire Randolph's and turned to see him coming down the courthouse steps with my Uncle Abner.

"What is this?" Randolph continued as he came closer. "Since when is Ramsey a member of your flock that you can harass him, Bronson?"

Bronson pushed his black hat back on his thatched white hair with the knob of his stick. Before he could speak, Uncle Abner cut in.

"Randolph, to my knowledge, among Bronson, Adam Bird, and Father Donovan, not one harasses his flock." Then he looked the short man in the eye. "What Ramsey does may be another matter. I have no knowledge of that."

Bronson was clearly torn between outrage and hurt when he heard this. "Why, Abner," he chided, "do you do this creature the honor of ranking him with the rest of us?"

"That choice is not for anyone here or not here," Abner replied. "It is in no man's hands."

"Do you know what is in that sack?" Bronson demanded.

"I might guess," my uncle said quietly. "I am unable to answer if I have not looked inside."

Ramsey looked quickly at all of us. "Do you want to know what's in the sack—all of you? I'll show you what it is!" He rapidly undid the cord binding the throat of the burlap, then placed the sack on the ground. I could see what I suspected before: something was

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squirming about inside. Ramsey stooped, grasped the bottom of the sack, and lifted, spilling the contents on the ground.

Everyone except Ramsey and Uncle Abner gasped involuntarily and moved backward.

Coming out of the mouth of the sack was a snake. It was not stretched to full length, but I guessed it at four feet. Its scales, as it twisted in the sunlight, reminded me of dusty, coarse-mesh, woven metal. It did not need to sound its warning.

A timber rattler.

Bronson was the first to recover. "Then it is true!" he rumbled. "You *have* proclaimed yourself the head of a demented group who see salvation in handling man's oldest enemy. That enemy the Lord addressed in Eden, saying *dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life!*" He raised his stick high, and his intent was clear. He was out to kill.

Ramsey calmly stepped past the menace on the ground and grasped the stick. "Leave off, old man," he said. "I don't interfere with you and the ways of those who follow you. Don't you interfere with me and mine."

He feinted at the snake with his right foot. The creature stopped in its attempt to get away from us and coiled itself. The short man provoked it no further.

"We follow our Lord as much as you do," Ramsey went on. "What did he say about those who believe? *They shall take up serpents.*"

He stooped, seemingly unmindful that the creature was poised to strike. Then, with a movement so quick that I could not follow, he had picked the thing up and was holding it outstretched in his two hands.

"Preacher," he said casually, "I could hand this to any one of those who believe as I do. Their faith lets them accept it and keeps them unharmed. Does your faith extend that far?"

"If you mean would I lay down my life for my Lord," Bronson replied in measured tones, "there would be no hesitation. But, consider this, man—what you have quoted is not a commandment. It points to a possibility, but it is not a requirement of a believer. It does not say *thou must.*"

"I am not one for taking words apart," Ramsey answered, apparently ignoring the serpent in his hands. "I only go by what was said, what's in the Scriptures."

"All of these words make me weary," Randolph interrupted. "Put your monster away, Ramsey, and go."

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"Be glad to, Squire," the short man said. "I never began this in the first place." He glanced at me. "Now, if the boy would just reach that sack up here to me—"

Before I could move, Uncle Abner stooped and picked up the sack. He spread its neck wide.

"I think more experience is needed than Martin has just now," he said. "Do you agree, Ramsey?"

The short man smiled faintly. "If you say so. Some of my people are even younger'n him."

He plopped the snake into the sack headfirst and drew the mouth of it shut. From a trouser pocket he took the cord, wrapped it around the neck of the burlap several times, and tied it tightly.

In a very short time, I had come to realize that what I had only heard as rumor was true: that Ramsey, the keeper of a small store, was also the self-appointed leader of a sect professing to be Christian. They differed from other Christians around us by insisting that true believers were commanded to take up poisonous serpents and pass them from one to the other during the worship service. It was also said that they frequently drank of brews of vegetable poisons. All of this was alleged to result in no harm to any of them.

These services were said to take place on Sundays in a room behind Ramsey's store. I could not testify to the truth of any of this, since I was never in the vicinity of the place on Sundays.

Ramsey had just tied the sack when a man came running around the side of the courthouse. When he saw us, he shouted.

"There he is! That Ramsey— Squire, see that he's held! Don't let him get away!"

Ramsey did not seem disturbed by this latest assault. Instead of turning to flee, he stood still. Randolph stared in puzzlement, tapping his gold-headed cane against his left palm.

The man who had shouted proved to be Justin Blackwell, the nephew of Clayburn Stewart, a well-to-do old man. Blackwell had been raised by his uncle since he was ten, when his parents had both died in a smallpox outbreak. Neither the old man nor the nephew was well liked, although Nathaniel Stewart, Clayburn's son, had been before he went to Canada to be his own man a few years back.

Blackwell hastened to us, almost stumbling as he came. Sweat beaded his fleshy face and glistened on his thin eyebrows. His coat was wrinkled and the black stock at his neck was rumpled.

Although Randolph sometimes went too far to impress others, his

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comportment was now in keeping with his office. He stood perfectly still, regarding Blackwell, willing to listen.

"Yes, Blackwell?" he said. "We are all here, awaiting your further request."

I thought my uncle's eyes gleamed in momentary approval. The only time he ever displayed dislike was at a time when he was provoked to decent outrage. I knew that he disliked Blackwell, and I sensed that he was aware of this in Randolph, who was sworn to impartiality.

Blackwell, just over middle height, drew himself up. In spite of his fleshy face, he was fit enough. His thick fingers worked at his sides.

When he spoke, it was with a voice under control at the start. "Ramsey, you're a cool enough rogue, I must say." Then his tone changed. "Squire, I charge this man with the murder of my uncle. Will you see that he is taken into custody?"

Randolph gestured with his cane. "Why not take your accusation to Thaxton?" He was indicating the courthouse, in the direction of the sheriff's office.

Uncle Abner interrupted. "He has probably learned that Thaxton is not there. He has left only a clerk to collect taxes."

"Ah," said Randolph, who was empowered to enforce the law if necessary. "In that case—"

"One moment, Randolph," said my uncle. "Blackwell, you say your uncle is dead. Are you certain?"

Blackwell's face reddened with annoyance. "Doctor Storm made that pronouncement five minutes ago."

"You are sure it was murder, and that this man did it? That is a very serious charge to bring."

I knew that my uncle's challenge was motivated by more than usual caution. He would hesitate long before standing in direct opposition to a man of God, even so unlikely a one as Ramsey.

Blackwell ignored Uncle Abner. He addressed himself only to Randolph.

"Hear me out, Squire, and you'll have to agree with what I say." He gestured toward Ramsey's sack. "Why, the rascal even has the evidence with him."

He extended his right arm and used his index finger to emphasize his words. As he talked, he slowly swung that thick finger toward each of the four other men in turn. "You all knew my Uncle Clay.

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Some folks said he was hard, but nobody said he was unfair. Isn't that the truth?"

Randolph nodded. "Aside from gossip and rumors—which I seldom hear—I think that is an honest statement."

Blackwell showed approval. "And you know he pulled something or other in his right leg two weeks ago, so bad he could sit up but not walk. This's true, too, isn't it?"

Bronson agreed. "I paid him a call two days ago. It's a pity to see an active man be so restricted."

Clayburn Stewart's nephew talked more about his uncle. "The fact that Uncle Clay collected rent on some properties is probably common knowledge. But did any of you know that he was the owner of the store that Ramsey rents?"

"Yes," said Uncle Abner. "Ramsey recently made me a good price on salt cake for my cattle so he could have the money he lacked on the rent that month."

Blackwell seemed surprised. He tried to keep his own business dealings quiet, possibly because he was none too successful. He must have thought his uncle was of the same mind.

He resumed. "But did he tell you that my uncle had learned of his infamous activities in the room behind that store? Did he tell you that Uncle Clay had given him notice to move?"

"It was not discussed," Abner replied. "Possibly he realized that I could give him no help. It is Clayburn Stewart's property, not mine."

"And he is a man you could not reason with," Ramsey interjected.

"You could if you had a fair and honest case," Blackwell retorted. "You went to see him this morning, didn't you, to try to get him to change his mind?"

"Yes," said Ramsey, "but I didn't see you. I suppose you were on the other side of the door listening after I got there."

Blackwell turned a deep red. "I was not there at any time. Mrs. Mullins let you in, but she heard none of your conversation except the shouting you and Uncle Clay did at each other. He wouldn't change his mind, would he?

"But you came prepared for that. You brought your revenge with you. Mrs. Mullins heard my uncle's awful shrieks and groans. She rushed to his bedroom, but the door was locked, and she was unable to bear the sounds that she could hear. She came as fast as she could to Halstead's house, where I had intended to go when I left home.

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Instead, she only found me on her way back, as I was returning from McCutcheon's.

"When I approached the house, I saw this man—" he pointed to Ramsey "—sauntering off in the distance. I rushed inside to my uncle's bedroom where the two had talked. The door was now open.

"What did we find? The room was in devastation. My uncle lay on the floor, halfway between his chair and the bed, which he must have tried to reach. His eyes were wide open in terror, and so was his mouth. It was clear to me that he was dead, but I ran for Doctor Storm to be certain."

"And was Stewart truly dead at that time?" Uncle Abner asked.

"Truly he was, Storm told me."

Abner continued. "What killed him, in Storm's opinion?"

Blackwell glared at Ramsey. "He had been bitten a total of ten times on his left leg and both arms by a poisonous snake!"

"The snake's venom killed him? Is that what Storm says?" my uncle persisted.

Blackwell snorted. "Storm says his heart failed, but that he is unable to say if the venom caused it or the terror of the creature's attack itself." He grimaced. "What difference? That devil there turned his hellish monster loose on that helpless old man and killed him!"

Abner was not finished. "What kind of snake was it?"

Blackwell hesitated. "I can't answer that. It must be in that sack. Look and see."

"We have already seen," said Abner. "There is a rattlesnake in there."

Blackwell turned to Randolph. "Then you have the evidence you need, Squire. Arrest him and pen up his snake."

Randolph cleared his throat to speak, but Uncle Abner forestalled him.

"Be careful, Randolph," he said. "Singular as this affair seems to be, possession of a snake is not evidence of a crime."

"What!" shouted Blackwell. "A man dies of a multitude of snake bites, his enemy is caught with a deadly serpent in his hands, and this is not evidence of a crime?"

"The snake should be inspected," Abner said gravely. "Ramsey—let it loose again."

Ramsey eyed him with respect and carefully undid the cord again. Just as carefully, he released his dreadful captive.

The snake had scarcely crawled free of its prison when Blackwell

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took a quick step forward, stooped, and grasped it by the tail. He straightened, raising his arm in a gesture that was somehow familiar to me.

"Blackwell! STOP!" my uncle shouted in a voice that I had seldom heard him use. "If you kill that creature, I will measure you on the ground!"

Blackwell froze, the snake turning and twisting as it hung in his grasp.

"God in Heaven!" whispered Randolph. "He would have whip-cracked its head off!"

"I forgot myself," Blackwell said. "I always kill them that way, then I'm sure that it's done."

"Put it on the ground," said Abner.

Blackwell dropped it and stood away quickly.

"Now, Ramsey, pick it up and let us look at it," Abner directed.

Ramsey did as he was told, as dexterously as he had done before.

My uncle fixed his glance on Blackwell. "Now, we are told that Clayburn Stewart was bitten ten times by a poisonous snake. Yet, in spite of his leg injury, he was surely not an inactive man, was he?"

Bronson shook his head. "When I saw him two days ago, he was restricted, but he was not feeble."

My uncle went on. "When even a man who is less active than before is threatened by a deadly serpent, terror usually gives him activity he has not possessed before the threat. We are told that Stewart tried to get to his bed. Surely, in those terrible moments, he inflicted some injury on his attacker—the attacker that had to get close to bite so many times!" He pointed to the squirming thing in Ramsey's hands. "Where are the injuries?" The snake seemed unmarked.

"The creature was faster than the old man," Blackwell objected.

"Very well," Uncle Abner said. "Put it down again, Ramsey."

The short man obeyed. The snake began to move even as Abner spoke again.

"Ten times the thing bit, you say. And the time of hibernation is close."

Abner looked at me. "Martin, lay your apple on the ground."

I obeyed, stepping well away from the snake.

"Bronson," my uncle directed, "take your cane and roll the apple toward the creature."

As the rattler saw the old man's stick begin to move, it coiled, and

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the dry whirr of warning sounded. The preacher was not stayed by this. He pushed the apple steadily toward the swaying triangular head.

Although I was expecting it, I barely saw the flashing attack when the snake struck. The next thing I did see clearly was the creature thrashing in the dust, its fangs buried so deep in the firm apple that it could not free itself.

"Once more, Ramsey," Uncle Abner said. "Take it up and hold its head firmly." When this was done, he went on, "The skin on my hands is unbroken, so it would be best that I do the next part."

Then, with the short man gripping the rattler's neck tightly, Abner gently pulled the apple firmly from its fangs. He now laid the apple gently on the ground, directed Ramsey to imprison the snake again, and drew out a knife. After studying the apple, he grasped it tightly and made a quick, steady cut. This satisfied him for he picked up part of the apple and showed it to everyone in turn.

There were two grooves in the flesh of the fruit, filled with a honey-like liquid. It would have oozed away had Abner permitted it.

"See," my uncle said. "It is the pure venom. That snake has not struck anything within twenty-four hours, at least. Certainly it has not bitten the flesh of a man ten times, for it would have nothing left. This is not your snake, Blackwell."

"Then Ramsey had two of them, and the other is gone!" Blackwell snapped.

"I agree that another snake did it," Uncle Abner said. "You have not yet proven that *Ramsey* turned it loose on Clayburn Stewart."

He looked at the apple with concern, aware of the poison. It was a trap for the unwary.

Without a word, Ramsey took it from him, scooped up the other piece, and dropped all of it into the sack. "Why don't we all go to Stewart's house and see what we can learn," he suggested.

Clearly, Abner appreciated that Ramsey had done him a service. Equally clearly, he respected the man.

"Truly you have no fear," he said. "You must know that the worst perils are not those that go on their bellies."

We set off for Stewart's house, Uncle Abner in the front rank, Blackwell walking on his left.

"Abner," said Blackwell, "if you will not believe in Ramsey's guilt, can you name another in his place?"

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"No," my uncle replied. "I know very little of Stewart's affairs."

"He has been as good as a father to me," Blackwell remarked. "I would do anything to find his killer."

"Will you ask your cousin's help?"

Blackwell laughed without humor. "Nat? He's a long way from here. Canada's not next door."

"You might be mistaken. I was told only yesterday that he was on his way home. He might be close, even now."

Blackwell almost lost a stride. "I didn't know. Where did you hear such a thing?"

"From Abel Warner. One of your cousin's good friends, he says he is," Abner said quietly. "He also told me that Nathaniel might spend the night with Luke Thompson before coming on."

Blackwell muttered something, then said in clearer tones, "But he is my own cousin."

"Is there something you should say?" my uncle asked. "It might be wiser to speak than not."

Blackwell walked on in silence, then finally answered. "There is something, Abner. It is the only shame my uncle ever brought on himself. Several years ago, Nat sent his father a certain sum of money and asked him to buy him a good tract of land. Instead, Uncle Clay had the land he bought deeded to himself. He tried to tell me it was really Nat's, that it was the safer thing to do. I knew better, but I said nothing."

None of us said anything more. Abner placed his long arms behind him and locked his hands. He was evidently considering this new information.

As we walked, I fancied I could hear the buzz of the snake's rattles in the sack. Somehow, this did not seem right, but I could not imagine what was wrong.

We finally came to Stewart's house, not quite three hundred yards west of the courthouse. It was a two-story brick, square and boxy, but arresting in a county where frame and log structures were the rule.

Blackwell spoke over his shoulder. "Better I should go ahead. I sent Mrs. Mullins home, she was so distraught."

He went up a gravel path to a small stoop of hewn stone and unlocked the front door, painted in rusty red. Inside, a center hall leading to a stairway divided the house: parlor and downstairs bed-

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room on the right, dining room and kitchen on the left. The floors were oiled, but much of the oil had been worn away.

Blackwell led the way to the lower bedroom. However, Uncle Abner stopped me and insisted that I sit on a chair in the hall. "You have a lifetime ahead of you, Martin," he said. "I think that this is one death you can miss." He was right. Cousin Levi's death began it when I was seven, and several more were yet to come, even before the bloody agony of our own nation that gave birth to our state.

The rest of the group vanished into the bedroom, leaving me alone, but I could hear their voices.

Even in a gasp, I could recognize Randolph's tone. "You did not exaggerate, Blackwell!"

"Even at that, Storm and I laid him on the bed before I left," Blackwell answered.

"Indeed, it was not the brass serpent of Moses that caused this," Bronson intoned. "The bite of that one gave life."

Blackwell continued. "You must also note that Storm has closed my uncle's eyes."

Uncle Abner's great voice was muted. "I think we are satisfied. We have seen for ourselves, and we trust what Storm says. We must now move to the next task."

"To find the guilty man?" Blackwell asked. "He might still be among us."

I knew that he meant Ramsey.

"That, also," Abner replied. "The task I mean is to find the other snake, no easy thing to do."

I could hear a restless movement in the room. I would not have liked to be where the thing could be lurking. I drew my feet up to the highest rung of the chair.

"We can search the room if you wish," said Abner, "but I doubt that it is here. If it lives, it will either have escaped or been carried away. Indeed, I am willing to defer a search of the house."

Randolph cleared his throat. "Even the cellar, Abner? Such a cool place would be a good hiding place, I should think?"

"A good reminder," my uncle answered. "That will be the first place I look when we come back." He then proceeded to direct the others in the search of the grounds, assigning each a one-fifth section. When they came from the room, he motioned to me to accompany him.

"We're going out of the back door," he said.

"What if I take the snake by surprise?" I asked.

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"If it seems alive at all, stay very still and call me," he answered.

The two of us and Randolph went out of the back door. Randolph, carrying his stick at the ready, went toward a small garden to the left. I glanced uneasily at the small unpainted one-story frame shed in front of us. It was a small wash house, raised on stones, with an eight-inch-high airspace beneath it. It seemed a perfect place for the creature to be hiding.

Uncle Abner knelt on the ground and lowered his face until he could see under the wash house. His beard brushed the grass.

"Martin," he said, "if anything comes out, tell me at once."

I glanced all along the side of the shed. Nothing moved.

Uncle Abner got up and started to the left. "We must do it three more times."

We had just rounded the corner when there was a shout from Randolph. "Here it is! In these bushes!" We could see him standing before a group of currant bushes, pointing with his stick. It was not clear whether he was wary of the snake or was avoiding the bushes to keep his clothing clean.

"Is it coiled?" Abner asked.

"It is not moving," Randolph answered. "It might not be alive."

"Good," said Abner, walking toward him, with me as a careful companion. When he came up to Randolph, he held out his hand. "If I may borrow your stick—"

"First, let me show you," Randolph offered, pointing. "See, there it is."

When Abner received the stick, he poked among the bushes. "Dead," I heard him say.

He reached down and plunged his arm beneath the shrubbery. In a few seconds he withdrew it. Grasped in his big fingers was the body of another rattlesnake, very close in size to the one Ramsey had. There was a noticeable difference.

"There is no head," said Randolph.

"That is not all," my uncle remarked, holding up the body for us to see.

The creature's skin was marked and torn in several places. Randolph remarked on it with satisfaction.

My uncle's face had assumed a grim expression. "Blackwell," he called, "we have found your snake!"

The other three men hastened to us to confirm the find, but Abner's attention was fastened on only one of them.

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Blackwell surveyed the find with an air of satisfaction. "So now we have the evidence. The next thing is to find the guilty man."

"That might not be too difficult," Abner said. "But first we must be satisfied that this is indeed the very snake we need."

"The evidence is still incomplete," Randolph pointed out. "The head is missing."

"That is not all." Uncle Abner held up the snake in his left hand and pointed out that the tail and the rattles were also gone.

"As flawed a piece of evidence as I have ever seen," Randolph observed.

"Perhaps not," Abner remarked. He turned to Bronson. "Would you hold an old adversary?"

The old man's eyes glinted. "Gladly."

Abner handed him the body of the snake and strode back to the wash house, still carrying Randolph's stick. He went to the front and knelt where he had before. Then he began to rake gently with the stick until an object slowly emerged. With infinite care, he picked the thing up and came back.

In his roughened palm he held the head of a rattlesnake, its jaws opened, its fangs forever ready to bite.

Abner handed back the stick. "Now the final test," he said.

From his pocket he took a red bandanna handkerchief and flipped it open. Then he maneuvered the snake's head until his fingers gripped it at a certain place near the jaws. When he had done this, he slipped some of the cloth under the points of the fangs. He now began to move his fingers gently where he gripped the triangular head. He continued this for perhaps a minute, then stopped and carefully disengaged the handkerchief. He held the cloth for all to see. "There is no poison. This is the creature you need, Randolph."

"And we also need the man," Randolph said.

"We have not far to seek," Abner said, his tone suddenly ominous. "Who among us kills serpents as though he were cracking a whip?"

Blackwell's face reddened, and a pulse showed in his temples. "I'm not the only man in the county who can do it! You'll have to do better than that!"

Abner turned to Ramsey and offered him the rattler's head to hold. He began to talk as he did so. "Which of these others has a cousin whose money might have been appropriated, not by a conniving old man, but by another conniver near his own age? Which of them would have needed to eliminate an old man to keep the truth from emerging? Did that old man truly take the money for

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his own use or did that old man's nephew intercept it and waste it? Can you stand the scrutiny, Blackwell?"

"It's all in your imagination," Blackwell retorted.

"Is it?" Uncle Abner shot back. "When you heard that Ramsey was coming to see Stewart, you must have decided to use the snake. How you happened to have it and be keeping it alive, I am unable to guess. Perhaps your plan began quite early. But when Ramsey left, you went into Stewart's room unobserved and turned the creature loose. When it was done, you caught it again, went out after Mrs. Mullins had left, killed the thing, and got rid of the body. Then you intercepted Mrs. Mullins and 'discovered' your uncle."

"You can't connect me with that creature!" Blackwell shouted.

"Why not?" said my uncle. "Who else would kill the thing in his own backyard and hide the head where it might never be found?" He walked over to Bronson and lifted part of the carcass. "On the way here, I thought I could hear Ramsey's snake rattling. I was wrong. Where is this one's tail?"

Before Blackwell could react, Abner was upon him, one huge arm restraining him, his left hand reaching into the pocket of his adversary's coat. The hand came out clutching the missing tail of the snake, a dry whirr sounding as it did so.

Later, when Blackwell, his wrists bound, was led away to the sheriff's custody by Randolph and Bronson, I was seated on the front stoop. My uncle was awaiting the coming of the undertaker, in temporary proxy for Nathaniel Stewart. He was standing beneath a nearby tree with Ramsey, who had loitered.

"You were an unlikely murderer," Uncle Abner said. "Angry with Stewart you might have been, but you knew that you will always be opposed. You needed only to move on to another place."

"That is true," the snake-handler replied.

My uncle went on in a mild tone. "I know the final part of the verse you rely on: *they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.*" He gestured toward the house, where Stewart lay. "Even now, you could—" He left the sentence unfinished.

With a half smile, Ramsey picked it up, "If I would. Is that it? But I would not, Abner. I would not."

"Ah," said Uncle Abner quietly, "then you are presuming the right to judge. You must point that out to me in the charge you have assumed."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Growing up in the hills of West Virginia, Helen Carper wrote to entertain her friends. Her interest in words found expression in entries to prize contests during the years she was at home bringing up a family. When her youngest started college, she went to work as a secretary on a local college campus and began taking classes on her lunch hours and evenings, later enrolling full-time.

She earned a B.S. in Education from West Virginia State College and later an M.A. in Journalism from Marshall University. She taught freshman composition at WVSC, at the same time writing and occasionally placing articles. Although she won first prize for feature writing and first prize for biography in the West Virginia Writers Association's annual awards competition in 1983, she has turned to fiction writing and discovered it is the writing form she likes best. We think that the clarity of style she has honed in her study and practice of journalism will serve her well in her career as a fiction writer and we're very grateful to her agent, Robert P. Mills, a former managing editor of EQMM, for bringing her first story to our attention . . .

THE TRUST

by HELEN CARPER

Ben Crozier was dying. There was no question about that. And it was clear that Ben had no question about when he would die. He would live until December 25th, he said. He was sure of it.

Quiet and despairing, Ellie, who had been married to Ben for thirty-five years, was sure of it, too. She had never known him to fail to have his way. When the too-serious, dark-browed Ben, old at thirty, asked eighteen-year-old Elinor, the golden, giggly, playful art student, to marry him, she had meant to say no, had imagined

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in detail beforehand the refusal and sending him away. To her surprise, she had found herself saying yes.

Nurse Bannon, who came daily to the tile-roofed old house on Rosewood Street, spelling Ellie from 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., and Dr. Metz, who checked his patient frequently, were obviously skeptical about Ben's timetable, although Dr. Metz was heard to say to Nurse Bannon that a gravely ill patient does sometimes live longer than his condition warrants, especially in anticipation of a holiday such as Christmas. "The will is very powerful, you know."

But Dr. Metz was wrong about Ben's reason for wanting to live until Christmas. Ellie started to tell the doctor so but thought better of it. Ben had never liked Christmas, tolerating but openly impatient with Ellie's insistence on a tree and presents. "Childish," he would say with contempt, and he would put away unused the shirts she persisted in giving him. She had loved buying the soft pastels in the cotton fabric Ben liked, fondly, foolishly hoping he would wear them—perhaps be softened by them, made to seem less somber. No, it wasn't Christmas that made Ben cling grimly to life. She had the uneasy feeling that he had somehow found another way to say *no* to her.

Early it had been the art lessons. "No, Elinor, you may not continue with your art classes. You have enough to do here at home."

"We both have too much to do here," Elinor had argued.

The house gleamed in its pristine tan paint and glossy, chocolate-brown trim, applied by Ben every year. The soft grey paint on the wide front porch, a platform for sedate wicker chairs, was renewed each May, before the lawn and garden required Ben's evenings and Saturdays and Sundays. The privet hedge looked as if it had been clipped to a carpenter's level. It had.

But Ben knew when to let go in his garden. His tulips bloomed in casual drifts—red, yellow, white—across the thickly grassed, closely cropped lawn. The flowering dogwoods, both pink and white, brought Sunday-afternoon drivers by the house in the spring, and the tall scarlet oaks brought them by in the fall. Color, symmetry, grace—she could so easily have loved the place, Elinor admitted to herself. "I hate it," she told Ben in a moment of anger.

She thought of the well kept house on the aging street as a deity, demanding daily sacrifices of time and energy. She chafed under the scheduled scrubbings and waxings Ben exacted from her. She especially resented the weekly polishing of the ornate cherry stair-rail with its intricately turned spindles, curving down to the entry

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hall. "How much simpler to have no upstairs at all," she told Ben, and with the optimism of youth she had tried to make a change.

"No, Elinor, we will not buy a house in the new subdivision," Ben had said, offended by her pleas and, finally, tears. "Cracker boxes," he said of the small starter homes. How could she want to leave the house on Rosewood, he asked, furious, his voice heavy with accusation.

As time went on, there were more no's. Including "No, Ellie, we will not go to Mexico on vacation this year. We'll go to the beach as usual." Then with great weariness: "Who would look after you, Ellie, if I weren't here? You have such foolish notions."

In retrospect, Ellie couldn't understand why she had even aired the plea for Mexico. But she had wanted to go so badly—she still wanted to go. She had seen a poster in a travel-agency window—laughing brown faces, blue water, sun. Timorously, she had entered and inquired and eagerly accepted the brochures the travel agent pushed on her. Later she had sent to the Mexican Embassy in Washington for more information and even enrolled for a while in a free Spanish class at the library.

Ben's illness progressed just as Dr. Metz had told him it would back in August, when Ben, theretofore big and brown and well, had consulted the doctor about a weight loss and an increasingly bothersome cough. Dr. Metz had been blunt. There was no cure; there were no options. For what seemed like a long time, Ben's lips thinned and locked in what Ellie recognized as their "No" position. "How long?" he asked finally.

"Two months—maybe three." Dr. Metz was watchful, his fatigue-shadowed eyes showing his concern.

In that case, Ben had said, he would die in his own bed, the bed he had been born in, in his parent's house.

Nurse Bannon came in late October, when Ben could no longer get downstairs, and it was she who found the daily calendar and placed it on the nightstand beside Ben's bed. Stiff and starchy and fresh from a full night's sleep, Nurse Bannon made a ceremony of changing the date each morning.

"Another day, Mr. Crozier," she would say brightly, turning the page, the sound of the rustling paper an affront in the quiet sickroom.

Ellie, taking the duty at four, had her own routine and her own

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"calendar," marking time with the radio that she kept on for company, but low so as not to disturb Ben's fragile rest. She thought of the sickroom as a secret, white world, suspended above the empty downstairs. Outside, the street was empty, too, the aged residents going into their houses at dusk, pulling the shades, and locking the doors, emerging only after daylight had moved into the sleeping street and was well established. In a reclining chair beside Ben's bed, Ellie spent the nightwatch, dozing, waking to Ben's wakefulness and need, or, more often, busying her hands with patchwork, a craft Ben approved of—"not like messy paints."

Ellie matched and stitched the small squares of bright prints and solids, and her thoughts flashed in and out with the quilting needle that left behind a trail of minute stitches. What was to become of her? Ben had been well enough the first month of his illness to make exhaustive lists for the care of the house. He had talked with painters and plumbers and gardeners before choosing workmen to be consulted when he was no longer there. But would she have enough money to pay the workmen? Ellie had tried to ask, but Ben was brusque and noncommittal. Was there a will? Ben's lawyer had come by the house one day, but she had been excluded from the meeting. The will, she supposed. But shouldn't she know about the will? Wouldn't there be things to do—after—that she needed to know about? Why wouldn't Ben talk to her? Tell her?

Ben slept fitfully, his long form wasted beneath the white sheet. The vaporizer near his bed kept up a steady soft hiss that helped mask the muted hum of the radio. Occasionally, Ben needed immediate and pressing attention. Nurse Bannon had taught Ellie how to suction the back of his throat and to do things she had never dreamed she could do with needles and IVs and catheters. On one especially bad evening, after Ellie had administered medication and changed his bed and made him comfortable, Ben touched the taut sheet beneath him and whispered, "You're a good nurse, Ellie." Unsteadied by the rare compliment, she had to fight to control tears.

But the days and nights, as patterned as the quilt squares Ellie stitched, were largely uneventful. Happy Hal, the radio announcer, signaled the approach of Halloween and urged his listeners to buy their jack-o'-lanterns at Westheimers. In mid-November, he began talking about the best buys in turkeys.

Two days before Thanksgiving, on November 23rd, Ben observed his sixty-fifth birthday. "Happy birthday!" Nurse Bannon caroled

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when she came on duty at eight, echoing Ellie's more subdued early-morning greeting. "I brought you a birthday cake, Mr. Crozier," she said, placing a rose-bedecked cake on the table beside his bed. It was cut with suitable ceremony when the doctor stopped by that afternoon. Dr. Metz offered his own good wishes, following his greeting quickly, almost apologetically, with a remark about the victory of the Cleveland Browns.

The day following Thanksgiving, Happy Hal began counting off the shopping days until Christmas. It was the next week when he crowed "The big *C* minus twenty" that Ellie learned why Ben was so determined to live until Christmas.

The letter bore the return address of Ben's former employer, Tamplin Tool and Die. Ellie read it, as she did all the mail that came now, before carrying it up to Ben.

"I think this is important, Ben," Ellie said quietly. She watched his face as he read the brief letter, and as he laid it aside without comment.

"Ben, we have to talk about this." Her voice was stubbornly insistent. "The letter says your company insurance expired on your birthday."

Wiping sweaty palms on the faded blue of her plain shirtwaist dress, she forced herself to go on when he made no reply. "Aren't you going to apply for the conversion policy they offer you? You have only a thirty-one-day grace period."

"I'm not going to apply for it, Ellie. You wouldn't be safe with so much money." Ben closed his eyes and turned his head away from her, pulling the top sheet up around his shoulders and shrugging down until his face was hidden from her.

"Surely you don't mean that, Ben." Ellie made an effort to keep her voice even. "What am I to live on?"

"You'll have enough," Ben muttered from the shelter of his cover.

Forgetting the need for calmness, Ellie raised her voice. "I'm terrified, Ben. Tell me, what is *enough?*" Reaching for his shoulders, she would have turned him forcibly to face her but the frailty of his frame stopped her and she withdrew her hands. "Ben, tell me."

Exasperated, he turned toward her and raised his shoulders to lean back on his elbows, anger making his voice stronger. "You'll have the house as long as you choose to live in it, and I've established a trust fund to take care of the house. There will be a small

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sum from the fund for you each month." He was caught by a paroxysm of coughing and sank back to his pillow, exhausted.

Grimly, she waited until he had recovered. "And if I don't choose to live in the house?"

"It goes to the Fenton Street Home for Boys." Ben's look was level, waiting, braced.

Confused, Ellie hesitated. She had assumed the house would be hers and she could sell it at last. How had he known?

"And the trust fund?" she asked finally.

"It goes with the house."

"Ben—" She was shaking with rage and disappointment and fumbling for words. "Do you realize you're making a house your heir and leaving your wife destitute?"

He was more alert than she had seen him for some time. Pleased? Yes, he was pleased. It showed in the lift of his upper lip when he spoke.

"You won't be destitute if you stay on in the house."

She did not choose to live in the house. She had never wanted to live here. She wouldn't. She wanted to live where it was warm, where people laughed—Mexico. But she would never get to live there. The grace period on the company insurance would expire with Christmas Eve. She wouldn't have enough money to travel.

"Why are you doing this to me, Ben?" she asked in despair, feeling old, *dependent.*

"You'll be safe, Ellie," said Ben, turning away from her again.

Trembling, she picked up her patchwork and put it down again. She had used up all of the solid-color patches. Tears ran unheeded down her cheeks.

On Christmas Day minus nine, Ellie, desperate for something to do with her hands, cut up the shirts she had given Ben for Christmas over the years. The rainbow of colored patches kept her busy. She felt a small twinge of discomfort when Ben, not very observant now, eyed the small squares. Did he know? Did it matter? He would never wear them.

Ellie didn't mention Ben's financial arrangements again. Perhaps, she thought, she could get a job doing home nursing. Ben had said she was good at it. Or perhaps the Boys' Home would make some kind of deal with her to get the house immediately. What was her life expectancy—twenty-five years more? Maybe they'd let her have the trust fund in exchange for the use of the house those years. She

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wouldn't need a lot of money in Mexico. She smiled, somewhat maliciously, thinking of the havoc active boys would wreak in the ordered lawn and garden.

Ellie was aware of a change of tempo in the world outside the house. Activity picked up on the street as the elderly residents emerged to indulge in an annual flurry of Christmas shopping, laying in stores for the anticipated holiday with its gifts of visiting children and grandchildren.

Some of the expectancy seemed to blow in with the snow that clung to Nurse Bannon or Dr. Metz when they arrived and left. Nurse Bannon took to wearing a small sprig of pine jeweled with red, gold, or green bells. She brought samples of the cookies she was baking for Christmas and talked endlessly of recipes.

Finally, it was the last day. Dr. Metz, watching Ben's labored breathing with its long pauses between breaths, had spoken of Cheyne-Stokes breathing when he stopped by that afternoon. At four, Nurse Bannon asked Ellie if she would like her to stay on that evening. No, Ellie said, she could manage.

At 7:30, the pauses between breaths were longer. Ellie sat, tense and watchful, rising from time to time to press a wet cloth to Ben's slack, dry lips.

I surprise myself, she thought sardonically. Frivolous, empty-headed Ellie attending alone the level-headed Ben's death.

Ben opened his eyes, startled.

Had she spoken aloud?

Ben turned his eyes to look at the calendar. "I made it, Ellie," he whispered.

"Yes, Ben, you made it," said Ellie, her eyes following his to the calendar. "December 25th, Ben. Another Christmas."

"Safe, Ellie. You'll be safe." His voice was barely audible. His expression was one of content.

Three hours later, Ellie waited for what seemed an eternity for another breath.

When none came, she expelled her own breath in a long sigh before going downstairs to call Dr. Metz.

Cold followed the doctor into the house through the opened front door.

He was still stamping snow from his boots in the hall, unwinding his long brown woollen scarf as he climbed the stairs, shrugging out

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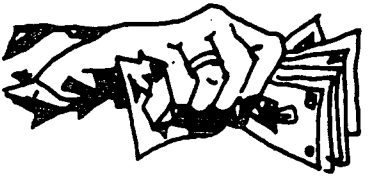
of his overcoat as he approached the bed to set his medical bag gently down beside Ben.

Later, after he had checked the body, pulled the sheet over Ben's face, and called the funeral home, he leaned casually against the bed and took a form from the opened medical bag. "Got to sign him out," he said, checking first the calendar and then his watch. He shook his head. "You know, I thought he'd make it."

"I thought so, too," said Ellie. And for the second time that night, she turned the calendar to December 25th.



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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

As Sheila began to close the cover of the yearbook, Derring found what he was looking for. "Here it is," he said, "I knew he had to be in here." It was a photo of a lean youth with a long forehead and short pale hair. He was applying an extravagant headlock to a pretty girl in a sweater set, pleated skirt, ankle sox, and flat shoes.

Sheila read the caption aloud. " 'Bennington King tries to control a spirited Suki Cannifton. You'll never tame her, Benny . . . !' "

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The carriage door slammed behind him and as Rex Derring sat down, the train crawled out of Waterloo Station. It was a fine summer day and he had saved forty-pence bus fare by walking from Sheila's flat in Holborn. Ahead lay an audition for a television role which he would probably not win.

"Thank you," a patronizing voice would call out. "We'll be in touch."

"I'd really like to do something in this series."

"Thank you."

Then, unless he was called for work as a replacement history teacher, it would be back to collecting social security.

Vauxhall, and the train slowed to a stop. This trip was a waste of time. The studio in Teddington would be ice-cold and the producer would listen to a dozen hopefuls before hiring the actor he'd had in mind since the script was commissioned. Worst of all would be telling Sheila he'd failed again. Sheila had such energy, she kept sending

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him off with a bellyful of fire and it was often as long as half an hour before Derring remembered he was a loser.

A man on the platform was cruising the train, peering through windows. There was plenty of choice this time of the afternoon—the carriages were almost empty. He spotted Derring, their eyes met, he opened the door, climbed up and in, and swung the door shut, sitting down on the facing seat so close they were knee to knee.

Here's what I needed, Derring said to himself. Nobody else around and this guy is going to invite me to his place for a drink. He turned his gaze deliberately to the scene outside the window as the train gathered speed. Next stop, Clapham Junction. If the newcomer struck up a conversation, Derring would get out and wait for the next train.

But the man said nothing. His breathing was audible over the clatter of the wheels. After a couple of minutes, Derring shifted his attention to the window on the other side of the carriage, letting his eyes rest for a moment in passing on the stranger's face. He was a man in his forties, ruddy-cheeked, yellow hair in thick curls like a Roman statue. He wore a pin-striped suit, flashy, and a pink shirt unbuttoned at the collar. His arms, folded across his chest, held a large hardbound book. He was perspiring.

The train slowed for Clapham Junction. As Derring made up his mind not to get off, he happened to establish eye contact with the stranger. It was a disturbing sensation. He felt as if he was being taken hold of, although the man made no move. His eyebrows lifted, inviting Derring to speak, but nothing was said as the platform recording called the names of stations, a few people boarded other carriages, and the train began to move.

Darkness for a few seconds as they rolled through an underpass, then back into sunlight. The man's eyes held Derring's and there was such intimacy between them now that the young actor smiled nervously. The train was picking up speed on the long run to Wimbledon.

The man leaned forward, rocking slowly back and forth. "You've got to do something for me, mate," he said. The accent was East London, slurred with drink.

"What is it?"

"Do you know Bennington King?"

Everybody knew Bennington King. His evening chat-show had been going out over BBC radio for as long as Rex Derring had been

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alive. He used to listen to Benny King up in Leeds before coming down to London. "I know *of* him."

The man handed over the book he was holding. "See that Mr. King gets this. But be careful—you could end up same as me." Those penetrating eyes narrowed slightly to confirm the importance of what he had said. Then he stood up, put his hand on the door handle, opened the door, and stepped out of the speeding train.

"Hey!" Derring called into the clattering, flashing space. The book in his hands was warm from the body heat of the vanished man. For the first time in his life, Rex Derring took hold of the emergency cord, pulled it, and braced himself as the brakes took hold.

Through the narrow streets of Soho at rush-hour, Derring hurried to his rendezvous with Sheila Rogers. On this pleasant evening, the doors of The Glasshouse were fastened open, the drinkers spilling out onto the pavement. Derring went inside and found Sheila at the end of the bar with her friends from the ad agency. They were a haggard bunch, smoking long cigarettes and drinking neat whisky, wearing expensive casual clothes, talking intrigue like a cell of anarchists. These were the highly paid creative people, a pride of young lions changing jobs in pursuit of the fatter accounts.

"Can we talk?" Derring asked Sheila after offering himself for the group's inspection. She believed it had to do with another failed audition so she followed him to a table against the back wall.

"Give it a chance," she anticipated his announcement. "They may call."

"I didn't even read. I got there too late."

This bothered her. "Rex, really—" Her baby face turned a deeper shade of pink. Sheila Rogers had come originally from Indianapolis to New York, where she was a medium success as a writer of advertising. But soon she learned that the scene was dominated by people who frightened her. So she flew to London, where she discovered she had something special going for her—the Midwest accent was worth a couple of thousand a year on her salary. And advertising was still fun in England. Like any game where the stakes are lower, the players are allowed to enjoy themselves.

Rex was trying to get through to her. "Listen, a terrible thing happened." He described his encounter with the wrought-up man and his departure from the moving train.

"He killed himself?"

"They showed me what was left. It isn't like in the movies."

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He was afraid Sheila might be about to call her friends over to share the sensation but he need not have worried. "Poor you. Never mind about the audition." She got up, opened her handbag, found her purse. "Don't go away." She went to the bar and brought him back a large whisky.

"I'm all right. It's that guy on the train." He tried to describe the feeling of closeness which had not yet left him. "I was the last man he was ever going to see. He gave me this book."

The cover was black, embossed with gold, with the title *Baytown High School Yearbook—1936/37*. It fell open across their laps, presenting a spread of photographs. They were candid black-and-white shots of students in their teens.

"Did you show this to the police?"

"No."

"Why not? It might be evidence. They'll want to know why he jumped."

"He told me to be careful." Derring searched for a name among the captions. "He said to give it to Bennington King."

"Did you promise?"

"I didn't have a chance to say anything."

"Well?"

"It was his dying request." When Sheila remained silent, he added: "Besides, King is an important man. I have a feeling that if I give this book to him—the circumstances being what they are—it could lead to something for me."

"Say no more. Let's ring him and tell him you've got it."

As she began to close the cover, Derring found what he was looking for. "Here it is," he said, pointing to a grainy shot of a boy with his arm around a girl. "I knew he had to be in here." It was a photo of a lean youth with a long forehead and short pale hair. He was applying an extravagant headlock to a pretty girl in a sweater set, pleated skirt, ankle sox, and flat shoes.

Sheila read the caption aloud. " 'Bennington King tries to control a spirited Suki Cannifton. You'll never tame her, Benny!' "

Derring was intrigued by this view of the great man's background. Something good was bound to come of it. God moved in a mysterious way, he thought. A word from King in the proper ear at Broadcasting House and Rex Derring could find himself a member of the privileged inner circle of actors who work regularly.

It needed a bit of wheedling for Derring to obtain King's home telephone number from the BBC switchboard. But he adopted a

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public-school accent and rattled on about having found the man's book on a train, a valuable item, surely he'd want to know it's safe. From there on, it was surprisingly easy. A woman answered at King's residence and called King to the telephone. Within seconds, the famous voice came through the earpiece, causing Derring to skip a breath.

"Sir, you don't know me. I was on a train out of Waterloo this afternoon—" He went on to describe the appearance of the troubled man at Vauxhall, his passing over of the yearbook with instructions that it be given to Bennington King, then his leap to sudden death from the carriage doorway.

King paused for a moment before he said: "I heard about the suicide on the news. No book was mentioned."

"I didn't show it to the police."

"Ah."

"It's the Baytown High School yearbook. Your picture is in it."

"I know. I was looking at the book only days ago. I know the man—Neil Simpson."

Derring held up crossed fingers at Sheila, who was crowded into the telephone booth with him. "I was wondering if you'd like me to bring the book around to your place."

"Good idea. I have to go out in an hour or so, but if you make it soon I'll give you a drink."

"Is it all right if my girl friend comes with me?"

"Perfectly all right. I'm on Beaufort Street around the corner from Cheyne Walk."

Bennington King accepted the yearbook from Derring's hand and set it aside without looking at it. Nor did he stand up or offer to shake hands. He was seated by a window in a giant Victorian armchair of wicker and bamboo. Through the window could be seen the Thames, the foot of Battersea Bridge, and a fleet of houseboats moored below the Embankment.

"Help yourselves to drinks from the cabinets. I have to finish plans for tonight's program. The lady who showed you in is my dear wife and secretary."

Derring led Sheila to the bar and poured a couple of brandies. They took their drinks and crept to a white-leather settee, where they sat down in unison, backs straight, knees together, concentrating on swallowing quietly.

Mrs. King was an ash-blonde in an expensive-looking green cor-

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duroy suit. She was obviously more of a consultant than a secretary. "You'll be making a mistake if you use that policeman, Benn," she said.

"I've interviewed him before. He's a great talker."

"Let the case lie. She was drunk when she fell—that was established. Now the coroner announces she was pregnant. It's becoming nasty, dear. Not for the Bennington King show."

"I bow to your superior judgment." King smiled across the room at his young visitors. Due to receding hairline, his forehead was even longer now than in the yearbook photograph. The horse-face was bisected by narrow spectacles in gold frames. After four decades as a broadcaster in England, his Canadian accent was as obvious as ever. "My wife is never wrong."

Derring knew the case they were talking about. Two weeks ago, a sexy young dancer-singer-actress named Tako, a notorious discotheque personality and user of illegal substances, had fallen from the nineteenth floor of a Park Lane hotel. The papers featured the story for days before letting go. But if the girl had been pregnant, they would be eager to play it again.

Mrs. King left the room to head off by telephone the raconteur-policeman. "My wife is a puritan," King said. "But she keeps me on the safe side. I measure my success from the day I married her." He took off his glasses and flourished them like a tiny flag. "Before I met that lady, I was just another anglophile Canadian rattling around London, trying to recapture my glory years when I was stationed here during the war."

Seizing a chance to ingratiate himself, Derring said: "Were you in the Army, sir?"

"Luckiest soldier in the First Division. I was in communications, drinking with journalists while a lot of my countrymen were giving the Germans target practice at Dieppe." King got up and turned to the window. "Down there among the houseboats—some of the smaller ones are converted landing craft. I ask myself sometimes what they did in the war."

"So you came back to London and got into radio."

"Eventually. Journalism at first. Did a bit of teaching. Then I made myself available to be interviewed over the air. One thing led to another and I ended up with a contract."

"You're a part of all our lives now," Sheila said.

"It's a pleasure for me," Derring said, "to be able to return your book."

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"Yes, the book." King's voice went flat. He glanced at the yearbook on the table, then turned his back on it as if it was dead and sooner or later somebody would have to bury it. "Neil was a self-destructive individual," he said. "Neil Simpson, the man you met on the train. Did he say something else to you?"

"Only to return your book," Derring said, holding back the doomed man's warning about being careful.

"I'm glad you did—great sentimental value. How are your drinks? Yes, Simpson was a compulsive gambler. He took most of the income from his shop and blew it on the horses. Or on the wheel. Or at cards. He'd bet on anything. The greengrocer's around the corner on Cheyne Walk—that's his place. He was a good worker, knew his fruit and veg. Up every morning before dawn, over to the new Covent Garden market at Nine Elms near Vauxhall Station, choosing the best for his customers." King went to the bar and opened a bottle of bitter lemon. "Neil Simpson did more than provide a service, he was a friend. But he was his own worst enemy."

Derring glanced at Sheila. They were a long way from establishing even the most rudimentary relationship with Bennington King. Their drinks were finished, it was time to go. "We looked through the book," Derring said. "I hope you don't mind. We saw the picture of you and your girl friend."

King turned with a glass of bitter lemon halfway to his lips. "The fabulous Suki Cannifton," he said. "Those were the days. I must be getting old, I spend most of my time down Memory Lane. That's what Neil Simpson and I were doing the other night in this very room. Drinking late, talking about old times, old friends. I brought out the book and we went through it together. He borrowed it to show his wife."

"Why do you suppose he killed himself, sir?"

"You wouldn't have to ask if you knew the amount he owed. And the people who were his creditors. Very tough types from the east end. That's where Simpson came from—he could be a hard man himself."

"It was kind," Sheila said, "that the last thing he thought of was to return your book to you."

"It was typical. Salt of the earth." King worked a thumb behind the gold frames as he went over to the bamboo throne and sat down. "Suki. Neil." He sighed. "Where does everybody go?"

In the winter of his discontent as an unfulfilled actor, Rex Derring

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took to arguing every day with Sheila. "Why don't you move out?" she asked him during one stereophonic wrangle. "This is my flat, why don't you move out of it?"

"Because there isn't any other place as cheap for me to live."

"Then why don't I throw you out?"

"Want to try?"

"Let go of me. I can get people to throw you. I can call the police."

"Nine nine nine is the number."

They went into adjoining rooms, which was all the distance the little apartment allowed. It was a small place for two people but when she was alone in it, Sheila could remember, the space was frightening. "Why are we trying to kill each other?" she called to him down the short hall.

"I think we're trying to kill ourselves."

"Why?"

"I can't say about you. For me, I've set myself the goal of becoming a professional actor, and in London in the 1980s that's impossible."

"You've dedicated yourself to failing."

"Correct."

"But why?"

"I can answer that very simply," Derring said. "I don't know."

After half a minute, Sheila began laughing in the next room. It was the sweetest sound Derring had heard in days. He wandered in and lay beside her and they held each other and he began to cry. After a while, he felt so good he couldn't remember what had been depressing him.

"Let's go out someplace," he suggested. "Let's spend about three pounds each on ourselves."

"I like your style. Where are we going?"

"The Alcove. There's a Canadian jazz trombonist there, name of Jason Takasaki."

"A fine old Canadian name."

"From Toronto. Actually, he should be from British Columbia but during the war the government confiscated his family's land and sent them all inland to a camp. To keep them from capturing the Rocky Mountains."

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm a student of history. It sounds cruel to dispossess people like that but it worked. Check the accounts of the war; the Japanese never did capture the Rocky Mountains."

As they were leaving the flat, dressed in scarves and hats against

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the London winter, Sheila said: "I hope this Canadian is more useful than the last one."

"Bennington King?"

"How long has it been, six months?"

"I was too indirect last summer. I should have laid my cards on the table. I should have said, help me Mr. King, sir. Use your influence to get me an acting job."

"Why not do it now? It isn't too late."

"Maybe I will." He put an arm around her shoulder. "Walk or take a bus?"

"Walk," she said, frosty breath rising from her lips. "I mean run."

The unseen owner of The Alcove spoke through a microphone. "Jason Takasaki, ladies and gentlemen. Let's hear it for him!"

There were not many people in the club for this first set, but they applauded enthusiastically. The portly trombonist had finished with an up-tempo performance of "There Will Never Be Another You" and Derring couldn't recall having heard such virtuosity on this difficult instrument. The Canadian played with only drums for accompaniment. He dared face the public with no other musicians to hide behind and Derring remembered hearing a story (apocryphal?) about Coleman Hawkins arriving for a date in some snowbound community, discovering the rest of the band had failed to make it, taking his saxophone to a stool in the center of the empty stage, and playing a two-hour concert of his favorite tunes for the world's luckiest jazz audience.

Takasaki wandered from the stand past the table where Derring and Sheila were sitting. The actor caught the musician's eye. "Can we buy you a drink?"

Takasaki sat down. In profile, he looked almost occidental. His smooth black hair was styled to cover more than half of his head; the plump face was that of a businessman. When he turned and smiled, his eyes presented a heavy-lidded gaze that recalled romantic screen idols of the Twenties. He accepted a beer and half emptied the glass at one swallow. "This stuff is my downfall." He patted his stomach.

After some talk about beer versus wine, Derring said: "Too bad there aren't more people in tonight."

"The late shows fill up." Takasaki looked around, signaling to people at distant tables. He was made for show business, a talented

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extrovert, ideally suited to appearing on stage alone. "I wasn't sure I wanted to play London. They talked me into it."

"I've been told musicians like London."

"It isn't the city. My daughter died here."

The announcement was so unexpected it almost passed without comment. Takasaki remained silent as if he wanted his companions to pick up the subject. Derring exchanged a glance with Sheila before saying: "When did she die?"

"Six months ago. You probably saw it in the news. She fell from a balcony in a hotel over on Park Lane."

"She was your daughter?"

"Tako. Yeah. I didn't see much of her, she went her own way."

Sheila set down her drink. "Some people don't think she just fell."

"I know. They said she was pregnant." Takasaki frowned. "That's what surprised me."

"Why?"

"She was twenty-four years old. She did a lot, dancing with that modern ballet, a couple of bits in films, traveling all over the world. If she got pregnant, it was on purpose."

A waiter passed and the musician ordered a round of drinks on his tab. The death of his daughter had not, apparently, disturbed him very much. He was a man who took everything that came his way as part of life's experience. Soon enough dead himself, Takasaki was not going to dilute his cup of life mourning a bereavement.

"I never saw a lot of her," he said. "I was only married to her mother for a year." He glanced at his companions, measuring their reaction to this revelation. He did the same thing while playing the trombone—looked across at individuals in his audience, reading their appreciation of his performance, feasting on approval. "Eight years ago was the last time I saw her, when we both went to Baytown to visit her mother. Since then, a couple of letters. Well, she used a version of my name—Tako. That must mean she was proud of me."

"And you were proud of her," Sheila said.

"Baytown," Derring said. "Isn't that in Ontario?"

"One of those quiet little places. People who can't stand the silence leave town."

"We heard something about Baytown recently."

"Tako's mother came to Toronto a long time ago, when I was studying at the conservatory. We had some good times and then she went back home." Takasaki glanced away as the drummer came on

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stage and flashed a brief roll on the snare. He finished his beer. "A while later I heard I was a daddy. That was good."

Acting on a hunch, Derring put the question: "What was your wife's maiden name?"

"She was named after a character in *The Threepenny Opera*. They called her Suki. Suki Cannifton."

The amplified voice from backstage said: "Welcome to showtime here at The Alcove—" Takasaki made a thumbs-up sign as he stood and headed for the stage.

"That's her!" Derring squeezed Sheila's arm so hard she had to take his hand away. "The girl in the photograph in Bennington King's yearbook."

"I know it is. So what?"

"I'm not sure. But we have to talk about it."

At the microphone, Takasaki hefted his glittering instrument, surveyed the fuller house, ended up squinting against the spotlight in the direction of the table where the young couple sat head to head, their faces pale in shadow. "Something I wrote not long ago," he announced. "I call it, 'Elegy for Tako'."

Early in the morning after the jazz club closed, the three of them went back to Sheila's place in Holborn. Sheila brought out a half full bottle of port and put on a pot of coffee. Derring turned the radio to a 24-hour station. The atmosphere tingled with whispering brass and the smell of coffee and they shared a smug feeling that not many people were making use of the night.

"Rex Derring!" Takasaki laughed into his drink. "Man, that is a terrific name for an actor. What was it before?"

Derring was accustomed to the reaction. "It's real. There's a whole clan of us up in Leeds."

"But why Rex? I thought Rex was a cowboy's dog."

"Think again. My parents liked jazz. They named me after Rex Stewart. I grew up listening to a scratchy old seventy-eight of 'Boy Meets Horn'."

"I'm impressed." Putting his lips together, Takasaki hummed a sequence of eccentric arpeggios from the great cornetist's famous solo.

Sheila brought them back to the moment. "What are we going to do about Bennington King?" She gave Derring a penetrating look.

"Am I missing something?" Takasaki asked.

"We're not sure." Derring switched off the radio. He told the mu-

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sician about the man who handed him the Baytown High School yearbook just before he threw himself from the train. "He said give it back to Bennington King, and he warned me to be careful."

"So?"

"The book contains a photograph of King as a student—with his arm around a girl named Suki Cannifton."

Takasaki considered the information. "What does it mean?"

"Maybe nothing. But there could be a connection. Tako—who is supposed to have fallen from a high window on Park Lane—turns out to be the daughter of a Baytown girl."

"My daughter."

"And the girl was a close friend of Bennington King. The yearbook linked them as an item." Derring glanced at Sheila, who took up the theory.

"What if Tako knew about her mother's friendship with King? Suki might have mentioned him to your daughter when she knew Tako was going to be in London."

"Suki would do that," Takasaki admitted.

"Tako could have approached King for whatever reason. A loan of money, an introduction to help her career, anything. She was a beautiful girl . . ." Sheila let the implication hang.

Takasaki took hold of it. "He made her pregnant, the old sonofabitch."

"Maybe Tako threatened him, we have to consider the possibility. It would have been the end of Bennington King's career if the press learned he'd been sleeping with a young dancer. He's based his public image on purity and righteousness."

"So," Derring said, "he arranged for this friend of his, Neil Simpson, to organize her fall from the nineteenth floor."

"Why would Simpson do that?"

"Because he owed King. Simpson was a compulsive gambler. He was due to lose the family greengrocer's shop. King had bailed him out more than once."

"A greengrocer? I don't believe it," Takasaki said.

"He was a tough man, an east-ender, ran around with the gambling crowd. Maybe he didn't actually do it, he may have been the go-between." Derring was beginning to convince himself. "There were gamblers at the party, that was in the news. Maybe Simpson was there, the police will have to check into it. But he was full of remorse just before he killed himself. I felt something and now I know what it was."

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Takasaki thought about it, nodded, accepted a coffee refill, refused the port. "You said police. They'd never buy the story you've just told me."

"I agree. We'll have to come up with a better idea. We'll have to work on King himself."

"That won't be easy," Sheila said.

"Why are you so concerned about all this?" Takasaki sat back in his chair. "What makes you so involved?"

Derring remembered Neil Simpson's desperate eyes. "I guess I'm fed up with suicides," he said. "It's a rotten thing to do to the people who have to go on living."

Sheila took the empty glass from Derring's hand and set it on the table. "I think he's ready for bed," she said to Takasaki. "Do you want to sleep here?"

"Thanks, I don't live far. The walk will clear my mind." At the door, he said: "I believe it. What happened is more or less what Rex has been saying."

"Do we tell the police?"

"It would go into a file. No, if we do anything it has to be through the man himself. Let's think about it."

Three o'clock in the afternoon inside a jazz club is like midnight in a bank. The Alcove was not only dark but cold, and Jason Takasaki had plugged in a portable electric heater to provide some warmth. He and Derring and Sheila sat on folding chairs in a semicircle close to the glowing bars. The silver trombone rested on a table.

"What if he doesn't come?" Sheila said. She thrust her hands further inside the opposite sleeves of her sweater.

"He said he liked the idea," Derring said.

"When did you phone him?"

"Three days ago. Today was the soonest he could make it."

"I'm freezing."

"I thought you had winters in Indianapolis."

"We also have central heating."

An electric bell rang. Takasaki got up and headed for the front door. He returned, leading Bennington King into the warm. The older man was dressed in a camel-hair overcoat of extravagant dimensions with a sash belt knotted and hanging almost to the hem. Hatless, he carried a small cassette tape recorder with built-in microphone.

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"Sorry I'm late," he said. "My wife always schedules at least one overseas call when she knows I have an outside appointment. It's called keeping your husband at home. Hello, you two—nice to see you again." He shook Derring's hand as he unbelted the massive coat, then, bending to kiss Sheila's cheek, he displayed a matador's cape of scarlet lining. "So this is the famous Jason Takasaki. Jase the Ace. What is it about Canada that produces outstanding jazz musicians?"

"It's an illusion," Takasaki said. "The few we have, you hear about. The States has more players than you can count. I saw their latest Armed Forces swing band on TV the other night. They all looked nineteen and it sounded like Basie."

"Listen to the self-effacement," King said. "*That's* Canadian, anyway." He set the recording machine on the table and switched it on. "I didn't bring an engineer, but don't be alarmed. This isn't for broadcast, it's just to play for the production team to decide if we want to use the item."

"What do you want first?" Takasaki asked. "The music?"

"A few bars. I'm told it's dedicated to that girl who jumped from the hotel."

"He calls it 'Elegy for Tako'," Sheila said.

The trombonist placed himself facing the recording machine and began to play the slow blues. He stopped soon and said: "It goes like that."

"Very nice," King said. "We may bring you into the studio and do it live. How did you come to write it?"

"Tako is my daughter."

"Really? I'm surprised. There was nothing in the press."

"We were never close. But I thought her mother might have mentioned me to you. Your old friend, Suki Cannifton."

Bennington King took his glasses off and began to polish the lenses on the sash of his coat. The big face was pink and moist, glistening teeth exposed in a half grin. "There's always an angle. I had a suspicion when young Derring called me, but I thought I'd come along and find out." He put the glasses on and their weight switched off the grin. "What is it, blackmail?"

"Justice," Takasaki said.

"You won't find a lot of that around here," King said. He got up and went to the recording machine, snapped it open, and showed them the empty compartment. "Look Ma," he said, "no cassette."

After a moment's silence, Derring said: "Simpson said something

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to me before he left the train. Something I haven't told the police yet. He confessed he was at the party in the hotel, that he fed Tako drinks, and that when she was nearly unconscious he helped her over the railing of that balcony."

"Now that is a stunning revelation. It would gain you some notoriety as a liar but it will cut no ice whatever with the police. You should have reported it at the time. Why didn't you? Because you're making it up. Neil Simpson said no such thing."

Derring remained silent.

"I can tell you about Neil Simpson. We all have the element of self-destruction in us but he had more than his share. I brought him back from the brink several times with gifts of money to pay off the collectors who were going to break his head."

"He was in your debt."

King ignored Sheila's interruption. "We were drinking together—we did that well. We used to reminisce. He'd tell me about when he was a boy and the family went picking hops in Kent. It was hard work but he loved it because they all lived together for weeks in a cabin with a fire outside at night. I told him about Baytown. Here I am, nearly forty years in London, one of the world's great cities, and I'm somebody here. But I miss that little place where I was nobody. Just the kid who got heaved off the float on the Sunday School sleighride and twisted my ankle so that by the time I got back to the hall, the supper was over. They thought I'd gone home, they ate without me." King's face looked its age.

"What about Neil Simpson?" Derring asked quietly.

"I showed him the yearbook. The picture of me and Suki fascinated him. He took it with him when he went home that night. I was drunk. I didn't notice the book was gone till the next day and you telephoned and said you had it."

"Why did he take it?" Sheila asked. "It proves there was a connection between you and him and Tako's mother."

"He had to show me at the end," King mused. "After all I did for him, he had to say to me: 'I, Neil Simpson, am free to take my life when I please—and to hand you back the dangerous evidence.' I suppose he thought it made us even."

"Then you admit it," Takasaki said.

"I admit nothing."

"I know what Simpson was saying to you," Derring said. "He was telling you to go to hell. And the reason he returned the book with its link between you and Tako's murder was because he wanted to

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protect his own name. He didn't want his family to know he was your paid killer."

The harshness of Derring's voice shook the broadcaster out of his lethargy. He got to his feet and belted his coat firmly. The useless recording machine went into a deep patch pocket. "Save your breath, my boy," he said, "to cool your porridge."

"I have something else here," Takasaki said. He took a couple of folded sheets of dark-blue paper from his shirt pocket. "My last letter from my daughter. She told me she was going to have a baby and said you were the father."

King snatched the letter, spread it open, and read it avidly. Tears welled up in his eyes. "You scum," he whispered. "To play with a man's feelings. Worthless scum. She never wrote this—it's a forgery, not even a good one. You put me down as if I'm not worth considering. You haven't that much respect for me." He crumpled the letter and threw it across the room.

"If you never knew Tako," the dead girl's father said, "how do you know that isn't her writing?"

King was reaching under his coat, finding a handkerchief in an inside pocket. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose. "If she'd only told me there was a baby," he said, "I would have helped her. She deliberately concealed her pregnancy because she wanted to hurt me. Why do people get such pleasure out of hurting other people? Money, it was always money. Or bookings. Make your friends hire me, Benn, or I'll tell the world you're sleeping with me. Well, really. I couldn't have that, could I?"

King walked away from the area of warmth into the chilly darkness of the passage leading to the front door. They heard him muttering: "Why do people do it . . .?"

After they heard the front door slam behind him, Takasaki called out: "Okay Peter, can we hear it?"

A voice echoed over the speaker. "Coming up, Jase." Then after a few seconds, the sound of Bennington King's recorded voice came through. " . . . If she'd only told me there was a baby, I would have helped her."

Takasaki packed his trombone and collected the tape while Derring switched off the electric heater. They went to a pub and tried to stay warm, this time by a gas fire pretending to be burning logs. "What's next, then?" Sheila asked. "We give the tape to the police?"

"Right. Will they believe it, Jase?"

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"It should be enough to start them asking questions. I got the feeling King isn't going to hide much."

Derring drank some beer. "I keep seeing this picture in my mind when I think about King. It's from an old Tarzan film I saw when I was a kid. The dying elephant wanders into the valley where all the elephants leave their bones. It was really sad."

Takasaki was irritable. "If you want to feel bad about endangered species," he said, "pick something closer to home. Weep for the babies who never get born." He finished his beer, picked up the tape, and went to find a police station.

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER MYSTERY

by C. SAND CHILDS

EQMM—ah, long may it thrive
On mysteries of stature and sheen
Like: Why does the December issue arrive
On September sixteen?

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

BRITISH MYSTERY WRITERS: Two recent books examine the life and works of important British mystery writers, and do it with skill and insight. Audrey Peterson's *Victorian Masters of Mystery* (Ungar, $11.95 hardcover, $6.95 paper) covers Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, and Arthur Conan Doyle, with brief looks at Mary Elizabeth Braddon, James Payn, and the American Anna Katharine Green. A checklist, bibliography, and index are included.

Collins also leads off *Twelve Englishmen of Mystery,* edited by Earl F. Bargainnier (Bowling Green U. Popular Press, $22.95 hardcover, $11.95 paper), which then moves on to such important Twentieth Century writers as G. K. Chesterton, Julian Symons, Michael Gilbert, Dick Francis, Edmund Crispin, H. R. F. Keating, Simon Brett, etc. Included are portraits of each author and a chronology of important dates in their lives.

CLASSIC STORIES: When Penguin Books publishes *The Penguin Classic Crime Omnibus* in America in November, priced at $5.95, readers will experience one of the best mystery anthologies of recent years. Editor Julian Symons has assembled 25 fine stories by writers ranging from the classic (Poe, Doyle, and Chesterton) to the modern (Stanley Ellin, P. D. James, and Ruth Rendell). As the cover says, all the famous names are there, but not the stories you might expect. Symons has chosen lesser-known but still classic tales and has contributed brief individual introductions pointing out the authors' strengths as well as some weaknesses. The result is a volume to be ranked with Dorothy L. Sayers' classic 1936 anthology, *Tales of Detection.*

CHESTERTON: The long-awaited Father Brown issue of *The Chesterton Review* was published this past summer, dated May 1984. Included are Chesterton's little-known 1925 essay "How To Write a Detective Story," with some worthwhile advice, and his uncollected short story "Dr. Hyde, Detective, and the White Pillars

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Murder," along with essays on Chesterton and Sayers, the recent Father Brown TV series, his influence on Boucher's Sister Ursula series, "Father Brown in Scandinavia," and other topics. The issue is a "must" for Father Brown fans. Subscription is $15.00 a year (four issues) from The Chesterton Review, St. Thomas More College, 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7N 0W6.

SHERLOCKIANA: For readers with space for only one collection of Sherlockian essays in their libraries, we can recommend *The Baker Street Reader: Cornerstone Writings About Sherlock Holmes,* edited by Philip A. Schreffler ($27.50 from Greenwood Press, Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881). The 28 essays range from early ones by T. S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and Conan Doyle himself to playful musings by Ronald A. Knox, Vincent Starrett, Rex Stout, and many others.

NEW BOOKSTORES: The trend toward specialized bookstores catering to mystery readers continues. Murder By the Book, 212 E. Cuyahoga Falls Avenue, Akron, OH 44310, is Ohio's largest mystery specialty shop, offering new and rare books, a search service, and catalogue sales. The Perfect Crime, 1958 E. Sunrise Boulevard (Gateway Shopping Center), Fort Lauderdale, FL 33304, is the only mystery specialty store in southern Florida, offering new paperbacks and used hardcover mysteries. New hardcovers will be added this fall.

COMPLETE ADVENTURES: For short-story readers who like everything in one convenient volume, this fall has been a bonanza. St. Martin's Press has published E. W. Hornung's *The Complete Short Stories of Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman* ($17.95), with an introductory essay by George Orwell and a foreword by Peter Haining. And in November Dodd Mead will publish *Hercule Poirot's Casebook* ($16.95), collecting all fifty short stories that Agatha Christie wrote about her famed sleuth.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Due from Walker are *A Carol in the Dark* by *AHMM* editor Cathleen Jordan (November), *A Graveyard of My Own* by Ron Goulart (January), *The Dead Seed* by William Campbell Gault (January), and *A Trail of Ashes* by Marian Babson (February).

One of the more successful new lines of paperback reprints, Quill Mysterious Classics, adds four more titles this fall: *The Deep End* by Fredric Brown, *Halo for Satan* and *Halo in Blood* by John Evans, and *The Killer Inside Me* by Jim Thompson.

Jon Breen and his wife Rita are editing an anthology of short novels from the old *American* magazine for Garland Publishing. Titled *American Murders,* it'll be published next year.

Coming from Ungar in November is *John le Carré* by Peter Lewis, the first full-length study of the master espionage novelist's life and works.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The sleepy, sun-baked Italian resort town of Cattolica on the Adriatic Sea seems an unlikely place for a mystery film marathon, but Mystfest—a week-long celebration of the suspense cinema—has been held there annually for the last five years. Mysteries and thrillers are referred to in Italy by the all-encompassing word *giallo* —"yellow"—named after the cover color of a popular mystery magazine, and the genre is taken very, *very* seriously. This year, as always, the mayor of Cattolica at the ancient town hall opened the festival (organized by a well known journalist, Felice Laudadio) to a group of several hundred film enthusiasts from all over Europe and somber journalists from as far as Rome and Milan (covering the event with dark-eyed Italian intensity).

The films presented at the Festival Cinema were an odd grouping. Starting at ten in the morning, the year's best mystery and suspense films from studios across Europe and America were judged by an all-women jury of writers and film correspondents. At a smaller auditorium nearby, video-tape programs were being reeled off simultaneously. At midnight, a selection of "fear films" was presented out of competition—but to great popular acclaim. And throughout the week, a retrospective of motion pictures drawn from the works of Agatha Christie (rare films carefully culled from European and American archives and collections) was intermixed with entries of more recent vintage. Actually, this year's Mystfest was dedicated to Christie—and curiously, the author herself was in the festival's final days placed on trial for relevancy.

Competition entries from the United States included a Los Angeles underworld thriller called *Repo Man,* as yet unreleased, and Bryan Forbes' *The Naked Face,* a major psychological mystery set in Chicago with Roger Moore shaking off his 007 image, plus some contributions to the midnight screenings, such as the bizarre but novel *The Evil Dead.* Brazil sent along two surprisingly interesting crime films, both concerning ordinary citizens caught in the dark urban undertow. Terrorism and political assassination were recurring concerns of dramas from Spain, France, and Italy—as were very contemporary tales of drug-running and fallout. A taut contribution from Yugoslavia detailed the attempt, ultimately tragic, of a trucker trying to haul contraband out of the country.

By far the most interesting film of the festival was called *Trauma,* an extraordinary German exercise in psychological suspense written and directed by a woman, Gabi Kubach, who was present. It tells of a woman working in a small

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Munich detective agency who takes on the assignment of tracking down another woman vanished from a lonely house along the coast of Brittany. There is much of the atmosphere of *Rebecca* and *Laura* in the film, as the search becomes almost surreal—our heroine finding herself assuming the personality of the missing Maria (presumably drowned in the sea), while trying to escape the menacing eye of the cryptic thirteen-year-old local girl who was Maria's friend. The ending is stunning.

But while *Trauma* was awarded special mention, the top prize went to an intricate British crime film, *Slayground*, taken from a book by Donald E. Westlake. A fairly honorable gangster plans a robbery in which one of his men inadvertently kills a little girl during the getaway. The child's father, a rich industrialist, hires a hit man who pursues the gang—eliminating them one by one, with Javert-like persistence. The climax is as unreal as *Trauma*'s is logical.

Screen players in attendance included Terence Stamp (Best Actor Award for *The Hit*), the beautiful Daria Niccolodi of *Deep Red,* and Monica Vitti, the villainess of *Modesty Blaise*.

The Agatha Christie trial during the last two days stirred great interest. An actual judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney presided bilingually—spectators receiving simultaneous translations on headsets. James Barnett, ex-Commander of Scotland Yard, testified as to her outmoded, sometimes inaccurate methods of criminal investigation. An Italian professor passionately called her writing style "tapioca." But a dazzling array of witnesses for the defense — including British author Christianna Brand ("Tapioca, my dears? Then it's the best tapioca on earth")—carried the day.

A surprise defense witness was Mathew Prichard, Christie's grandson, to whom she gave the royalties to *The Mousetrap* thirty-three years ago, now the longest-running stage play in the English-speaking theater. ("It's a smallish house and one of the few plays to which families can go," he explained.) Mathew contributed this interesting media note: his grandmother disliked television, for she felt it distracted young people from reading. She never owned a television set, but would occasionally be seen sneaking into the housekeeper's room to watch a program she felt couldn't be missed. She was modest, enthusiastic, and generous, and despite being the most popular writer of her day she suffered periods of literary despair and self-doubt.

Needless to say, at Mystfest Agatha Christie was acquitted.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Intrigue fiction set in the past can be based on a plausible historical premise: this could have happened. The flip side of that coin looks to the future, sometimes in a cautionary vein, and wraps a suspense plot around a plausible extrapolation of current political and social realities: this might happen. Such an approach does to politics what science fiction does to science. Several dozen examples of this subgenre exist.

The lastest addition is Frederick Forsyth's *The Fourth Protocol* (Viking, $17.95), set in 1987, primarily in England. A secret Soviet scheme, hidden even from the KGB and masterminded by Harold Philby, is designed to produce the ultimate destabilization of England, destroying NATO and isolating the U.S. British Intelligence, weakened by lack of unity and ignoring the best insights it has, is poorly equipped to repel the scheme. Forsyth's tale is truly fascinating and convincing, a twisty masterpiece.

The first two Neil Kelly mysteries by "S. F. X. Dean" (who is Francis Smith, Professor of Humanities at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts) were masterful accomplishments. The third, *Ceremony of Innocence* (Walker, $12.95)—well, the author's determination to involve Kelly to the depths of his feelings here stretches credibility to the breaking point. The intriguing plot interposes Professor Kelly's childhood in China with housebreakings and ultimately multiple murder during his sabbatical in England. It's the villain and his motivation I can't believe in. But otherwise Dean offers much to enjoy: adroit interplay, polished narrative. Close to a hit.

Switch by William Bayer (Linden Press, $14.95) is a vivid tale of psychological detection. Frank Janek is a New York detective, an insightful, inventive, committed cop, a divorced fifty-year-old who doesn't know how lonely he is. A retired colleague, his mentor, "eats" his .38. Suicide it clearly is, but why did the man kill himself when apparently he'd recently been revitalized digging into an old murder case? Then Janek is also assigned a bizarre double killing—someone dispatched two unconnected women in their separate Manhattan apartments and switched their heads. What sort of tortured mentality could produce that bloodletting? Skillfully told by the author, who won an Edgar for the 1981 novel *Peregrine*.

A little gem of a mystery—that's *A Death for Adonis* (St. Martin's, $11.95) by E. X. Giroux. In the England of 1944, a young man was hacked to death and a brilliant sculptor, who was found embracing the bloody corpse, was convicted for the crime. He was driven catatonic by the event, and such he still re-

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mains twenty-five years later. His daughter asks Robert Forsyth, a London attorney who left his practice under a dark cloud, to determine if her father could possibly have been innocent. Without much hope, he takes up the challenge, reconstructing that wartime setting.

Mignon Warner's sixth novel about her clairvoyant-sleuth Edwina Charles is *Illusion* (Doubleday, $11.95). It's quite a tidy and mystifying puzzler of the country-house variety. Danny Midas, director of a smash London play, invites the production team to his rural mansion. A series of circumstances—contrived?—maroons the team for the night. Infighting is the team's forte, and before long the first of several corpses turns up. Lies and created effects abound as the nocturnal hours pass and Edwina probes for truth.

Sandra Wilkinson, a registered nurse, offers a grimly effective picture of hospital and surgical practices in her debut, *Death on Call* (Dodd Mead, $12.95). Rosemary Cleaveland is administrator of Riverside Hospital in Boston, where preparations for a crucial accreditation survey are demolished by a murder, disappearances of drugs and syringes, persistent diagnostic failures in the hospital laboratory, and a research surgeon's pathological pursuit of equipment and support money. Cleaveland looks for connections and discovers that looking can be dangerous to health. A well paced, well placed tale.

The latest of Ellis Peters' explorations of medieval England and Brother Cadfael of the Benedictine Abbey in Shrewsbury is *The Devil's Novice* (Morrow, $13.95). The year is 1140. Into the abbey comes a new novice, a young man passionately and mysteriously aspirant to holy orders.

At the same time a cleric is sent by the crown to negotiate support from northern princes and so avoid a bloodbath; the cleric disappears without trace near Shrewsbury. Cadfael, a sensitive and compassionate and experienced man of sixty autumns, is involved in both matters: what gives his novice nightmares, and what—can it be guilt?—links him to the missing envoy? A fine story, told with warmth and conviction.

Ed McBain may not have invented the police procedural but he has done much to define and popularize the form in his 87th Precinct series. This has reached its thirty-seventh title in twenty-eight years: *Lightning* (Arbor House, $14.95). Here in Isola—a thinly disguised New York City—a rapist uncharacteristically strikes certain women again and again. And another menace gets his jollies by killing girls and stringing them up on streetlights. McBain has gone a bit overboard on sensation, but *Lightning* is the usual compelling story.

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DETECTIVERSE

INITIALLY YOURS

by JOAN PARKS

Sue and Ed Krauss
Filled their house
With monogrammed souvenirs,
Now two cells in prison
Are marked "hers" and "his'n"
'Cause the monograms weren't theirs.

© 1984 by Joan Parks.

"Q"

SHE DID IT HER WAY

by EILEEN ELLEN MURPHY

A wicked wife beater named Strunk
Punched his wife every time he got drunk.
She loathed him, of course,
But frowned on divorce,
So she sent him abroad in a trunk.

© 1984 by Eileen Ellen Murphy.

"Q"

CANINE INSOMNIA

by JANET E. KEARIN

Sherlock Holmes was awake after midnight,
But not from his efforts to fight crime.
"If only," thought he through the barking,
"The dog did nothing in the nighttime."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

ANNA CLARKE

There was the German ship Vera *in Katherine Anne Porter's* Ship of Fools. *There was Tim Heald's* Bertolt Brecht *in "Simon Bognor and the Man Overboard" in the October 1984 issue of EQMM. And now we have another fiction set on board a German ship. Although this ship is not given a name, the intrigue between its passengers and crew are all you might expect, especially given the author's special gifts for characterization and plot . . .*

TRIANGLE AT SEA

by ANNA CLARKE

I first saw them in the Floral Lounge, the coolest and most comfortable part of the ship.

The elderly man had a fine head of white hair, good features, and a very courteous manner. The two old women appeared to complement each other. One of them was large and commanding and had one of those upper-class English voices that seem to penetrate everywhere. The other was tall and thin with a long melancholy face and a voice that was equally irritating in a different way: a gentle nagging voice, the sort that drives a patient husband to drink or desperation. I judged her to be either the paid companion or a poor relation of the aristocratic lady.

My book lay open on my lap. I raised my eyes from its pages and stared with great concentration at an indigo sea and a spectacular orange sunset while I listened to the little drama. I am an unobtrusive sort of person and have often been criticized by my friends for not making the most of myself. But this is what an "observer" ought to be. People smile at me and ask me if I am enjoying the cruise, and I say I am, and they immediately start telling me about them-

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selves, which I find very fascinating and also very useful material for my stories.

"Now, Frederick," said the lady-of-the-manor, "I am going to make you a little present."

"That's very kind of you, Julia," was the reply.

The old man had an attractive voice. It was measured, cultivated, but not too posh. Retired lawyer? Doctor? Or some sort of scholar?

"I have it here," said Julia. "At least I thought I did. It was wrapped in tissue paper. Nellie—" very accusing "—did you take that little parcel out of my handbag?"

The last word was pronounced in true Lady Bracknell style. I ventured to glance across at the three of them. They took not the slightest notice of me. An enormous black-leather bag lay on the seat between the two ladies and both of them were scrabbling about in it, as if trying to find the prize in the lucky dip. The old man seemed to be watching them with as much curiosity as I was myself.

"You carry too much about with you, Julia," said the nagging voice. "Why don't you leave valuables with the purser?"

Not a paid companion, I thought. Calls her "Julia." Friend or relation. Maybe not so downtrodden, after all.

"Because I don't trust these Germans one inch," cried the loud voice at the very moment that the chief officer, a handsome Bavarian, happened to be walking through the lounge. I looked up and caught his eye and received a cheerful wink.

"It's perfectly disgraceful," continued Julia, "that there is no British ship cruising to this part of the world."

"But the purser has to be honest," protested Nellie. "I really do think you could trust him."

"Ah! I've got it." Julia's voice triumphed over all opposition. Nellie was silenced. Frederick leaned forward in his chair opposite the two women. The chief officer paused and turned his reddish-gold head, and several people at nearby tables turned their heads, too. The three main actors still appeared to be blissfully unaware that we were all of us holding our breaths with curiosity and suspense.

I had the best vantage point. The white wrapping paper was laid on the knees of Julia's lemon-colored trousers and her plump fingers, generously splashed with rings, unfolded the paper. The chief officer, under pretext of checking a fire hydrant, actually took a step back toward the group. At least half a dozen pairs of eyes watched with the intensity of fascination normally only accorded to a conjuror.

The object was produced at last.

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It was a little piéce of soft material, shining and scarlet.

"A cravat!" exclaimed Frederick. "How very delightful!"

"It belonged to my husband," boomed Julia. "He always liked to wear a cravat. I have a number of them remaining, although it's six years since he died. I always take some of his possessions with me when I go on a cruise in case I should have the opportunity of making somebody a little gift."

"That is a very charming and friendly thing to do," said Frederick.

I admired his composure. It was all I could do not to laugh out loud. I could hear the chief officer still fiddling around with the fire hydrant behind me and I knew that if I were to catch his eye we should both explode. But a moment later it no longer seemed so funny. Julia was leaning back in her seat and I suddenly found myself looking beyond all the jewelry and the smart cruising clothes to the tired and perhaps lonely old lady beneath. Was she looking for another husband? Or just short-term companionship? And what part did Nellie play?

"I'm so glad you like it." The voice was slightly muted.

"I like it very much," said Frederick, folding up the cravat and slipping it into the pocket of his safari shirt. "Thank you very much indeed." There was a moment's silence. The chief officer went on his way at last and the other viewers returned to their own affairs. I alone continued to listen and observe.

Nellie was the next to speak. "I think he would have preferred the gold cufflinks," she said.

"Would you, Frederick?" Julia actually sounded quite anxious. "Would you rather have had a gift of jewelry?"

"My dear lady," he replied, "there is absolutely no reason why you should make me a present of any sort at all, but you have done me that kindness, and I find the gift very much to my taste."

Oh, thank you, Frederick, I found myself mentally exclaiming, for the little scene now appeared to me as almost unbearably pathetic, with the commanding Julia at the heart of the pathos. As for Nellie, I could have hit her.

When the bell sounded for luncheon, we all trooped into the dining room like ravenous schoolchildren, although it was barely two hours since we had had our midmorning refreshments and in another couple of hours there would be afternoon tea. We helped ourselves and I deserted my usual quiet corner table and followed the three

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old people to the center of the room, where I seated myself behind the old man and listened shamelessly to their conversation.

This time it was dominated by Nellie's thin monotone. She was telling Frederick about Julia's home and possessions. I learned that Nellie was Julia's cousin and lived with her in what sounded like an exceedingly luxurious country mansion. Frederick, permitted a few sentences occasionally, identified himself as a retired actor.

I was disappointed. I had hoped he was genuine, but found his account of himself rather suspicious and wondered what he was up to. Nellie's object appeared plain enough: to impress this agreeable and personable old man with Julia's wealth and social position.

But to what end? To find Julia another husband? Perhaps the whole business had been gone through before, on earlier cruises. There are, of course, far more lone old women than old men in the world, but with so much on offer surely one of the latter could be bought. It was all most intriguing, and strangest of all was the part played by Nellie. If Julia hooked Frederick, surely Nellie would lose her home and inheritance? Unless, of course, she was being paid to do the hooking.

In which case, she was in an excellent position to try some double-crossing. Oh, Julia, I thought, I do hope you will take care. This is a dangerous game you are playing and you'd do better to play it alone.

During the next couple of days I found myself surprisingly worried about Julia and I kept a close watch on the trio. Frederick appeared to be well and truly caught.

"Why aren't you wearing the cravat?" I heard Julia demand in her most imperious manner one morning in the Floral Lounge.

"I will fetch it at once, dear lady," he replied, getting up from his seat.

"No, no—don't go now. I only want to be reassured that you like it."

"I'm sure he'd prefer the diamond tiepin," put in Nellie.

"I didn't bring it," retorted Julia almost snappishly.

"Yes, you did," said Nellie. "I saw you put it in myself, together with the cufflinks and several other pieces."

She's crazy, I said to myself. They both are. These women positively deserve to lose their valuables.

That evening Frederick was wearing not only the cravat, but the pin and the cufflinks as well. On anybody else it would have looked

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most peculiar, but he had an air about him that could carry off anything. After dinner they settled themselves in deckchairs to enjoy the moonlight on the water and I leaned over the rail a few feet away.

The first officer, doing his social rounds, stopped to speak to them.

"I want you to put on a play during the cruise," boomed Julia, "so that Frederick can take a leading part."

"You might suggest it to the entertainments director," replied my Bavarian friend tactfully. "He is always pleased to make use of the talents of passengers."

"I must decline the honor, dear Julia," said Frederick in the smooth tone that had at first attracted me but that I was now beginning to find rather nauseating. "After all, I'm on holiday."

"That's true. Oh, well. Later on, perhaps. When we get home."

"Ah. When we get home. Great things will happen. That's right, isn't it, Julia?"

"I hope you will feel much the better for your holiday," said the first officer, "and I hope we shall have the pleasure of welcoming you aboard next winter."

"Thank you, sir." It was Frederick's voice again. "But I think we will probably have other plans. Eh, Julia?"

The next thing I heard was a little laugh. It had to come from Julia, but it really was the most extraordinary sound and it added to my sense of unease. A young courting couple came and leaned on the rail near me, and to get away from them I moved farther along the deck to a quiet spot behind a lifeboat. After a minute or two, I heard and felt somebody come and stand beside me. I had no need to glance at the gold braid to know who it was.

"Is it true," I asked in German, "that the captain of a vessel at sea is authorized to perform a marriage ceremony?"

"Perfectly true." The first officer laughed. "When shall it be, Liebling?"

"You're going too fast, Willy. I'm thinking of the lady-of-the-manor and her conquest."

"Oh, yes." He was immediately serious. "That is a very different matter. I've spoken to the captain and it's as I feared."

"The old man? Frederick?"

"Yes. He was on our sister ship last year. An elderly lady lost some very valuable possessions. Oh, no—nothing so crude as theft. They were freely given to the charming old gentleman whom she

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expected to marry. No charges were made—there was no crime after all—and for the old lady's sake it was all kept quiet."

"And now he is at it again."

"It seems so. It's very sad, but there is nothing we can do to stop it. He has committed no offense, not even impersonation. He really is a retired actor. If rich old ladies choose to behave in this way—"

The first officer shrugged and started to move away.

"I'm still not satisfied," I said. "I think Julia may be in danger."

"How so?"

"How easy is it for someone to disappear on board ship?" I countered.

"Now, Liebling—"

"Don't tell me it can't happen. I don't believe it."

"Of course it can happen, but it's not so easy. She is a big lady. She is not weak and small like a child. And why should he wish to get rid of the goose who lays the golden eggs?"

"*He* may not want to, but the other lady might."

"The cousin who inherits? She is aiming for both the man and the money? You are full of ideas, Marianne."

"I have to be," I retorted. "I make my living by writing stories."

"And don't you think you may be making up a little story now?"

"There's something behind it," I said obstinately. "It isn't just an old woman handing over jewelry to a smart con man."

"All right," he said resignedly. "I will keep watch. And I will tell the stewards to keep watch, too. Attempted murder at sea—oh, no, that won't do our business any good at all."

He did his best, and I know the stewards did, too, but I was the one who actually saw it happen.

We were anchored at one of our tropical ports of call and most of the passengers had gone ashore. A small group, mostly elderly, lay dozing around the swimming pool on the lido deck after luncheon. Siesta time. All very lazy. My sunhat covered my face. I was as still as the tomb on my sunlounger. A faint splashing told me that someone had got into the pool. I shifted very slightly. From under my hat I could see them. Nellie was in the water, swimming quite competently. Julia, in the lemon-yellow cruising suit, stood at the very edge of the pool. Beside her, with a hand resting on her shoulder, stood Frederick.

I glanced around. All the other bodies on deck, if they looked anywhere at all, were looking in a different direction. This was the

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ideal moment. Julia probably could not swim, and in any case if she tried to climb out there was Nellie, down in the pool, to hold her under water.

An accident, of course. Nellie's story would be that she had been trying to rescue her.

But what should I do? Jump up and make my presence known? That would stop anything happening now, but it would not stop them trying again later on. Wait and see, so that if anything happened there would be at least one witness that it was no accident? But that might be too late to save Julia.

While I was hesitating, the decision was made for me. There was a loud splash. I had been looking straight at Julia and Frederick, but even so I couldn't have sworn that she had been pushed, so neatly and quickly was it done. I found myself at the edge of the pool without any consciousness of how I had got there and I slithered into the water.

"Take her arms!" cried Nellie, panting and struggling with Julia's weight.

I began to struggle, too. She really was a very big woman indeed and her attempts to help herself only impeded us.

We got her out at last. Frederick was nowhere to be seen, and a couple of sunbathers who had woken up sufficiently to come and investigate told me they thought he had gone to fetch the ship's doctor.

"I don't want the doctor!" cried Julia, sitting up suddenly. "I want the captain! This wasn't an accident! I was pushed!"

The sunbathing couple exchanged glances and moved away. They had no desire to be involved in any sort of scene. I caught Nellie's eye and she nodded. It occurred to me then, for the first time, that Nellie really had been trying to save Julia from drowning even before I came on the scene. This did not fit with the role I had devised for her. Had I been wrong about everything else as well?

"Would you mind fetching the captain?" said Nellie. "I don't think I'd better leave her."

"I think he's ashore," I replied, "but I'll fetch the first officer."

And so my friend Willy took over and the whole story came out at last. I had been right in supposing that two of the trio were plotting against the third, but it was Julia and Nellie who were the schemers and Frederick who was to be trapped.

Oh, no—not into marriage. That was all put on for his benefit.

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The true aim was to get him to show himself up as the villain he was and to have him punished for it. Nellie was to implant in his mind the idea that if Julia were out of the way, he could have Nellie and her inherited fortune as well. She played her part to perfection. He fell for it completely.

"An exceedingly clever lady," said the chief officer. "And devoted to her cousin."

I said that I hoped she didn't realize I had been suspecting her.

"She will have forgiven you," he replied. "She doubts if she could have managed the rescue without your help."

"But what a risk to take." I shuddered. "Why did they do it? They'd never even met Frederick before."

"They had not met him, but Julia's sister had. I told you about the wealthy old lady on our sister ship."

Enlightenment came to me. "The one Frederick treated so badly? That was Julia's sister?"

"It was. And they were determined to get their own back. A very devoted family. Sisters and cousins and all."

"So what happens to Frederick? Can he be convicted of anything?"

"He certainly can," said the first officer grimly. "But first we've got to find him."

"You don't mean—"

Yes. He did mean that. Frederick had gone ashore. Run away. And with him had gone all the rest of Julia's valuables and loose money. He'd got hold of the key to her cabin and had taken the risk of collecting the lot while Nellie and I were by the pool deciding what was to be done.

We were in the harbor of a town where it was all too easy to hide and where one could live for a long time on very little money. No doubt Frederick would manage very well.

The two old ladies took his disappearance philosophically. They were delighted with what they regarded as the success of their scheme. The villain had been faced and challenged. Family honor had been upheld.

I listened to their tale of triumph and was inclined to sympathize with their desire that the matter should now be allowed to rest.

But it was the chief officer who felt personally affronted by the whole affair. He set inquiries going in the port, and he went on and on about Frederick all the way back to Europe. I tried to protest.

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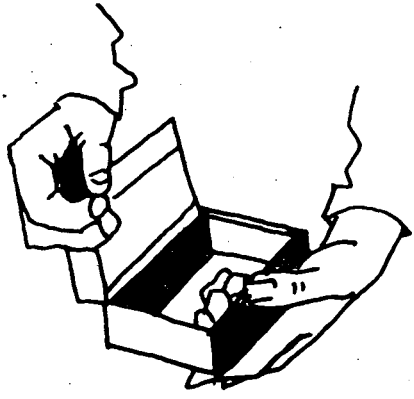
"But Willy, he's done you no harm. If the ladies are prepared to make no charge—"

"Right under my nose!" he cried. "How's that for impudence?"

In the end, I just tried to avoid the subject completely.

And I am avoiding it still. Apart from this one topic, my husband is the kindest and most compassionate of men, and our wandering life suits me admirably. But I always feel slightly anxious when we come to that port again. Supposing Frederick is still there and should take it into his head to stowaway on a cruise liner? We always carry a good quota of gullible old ladies. Supposing he should get hold of one of them and spin her a hard-luck story? I think I would rather not try to imagine how that particular tale might end.



DETECTIVERSE

DOUBLE TROUBLE

by J. C. HONEYCUTT

Playboy bigamist Farthington Chives
Might have rated a spot in *Brief Lives*.
His quick termination
By defenestration
Came from loving—but not well—two wives.

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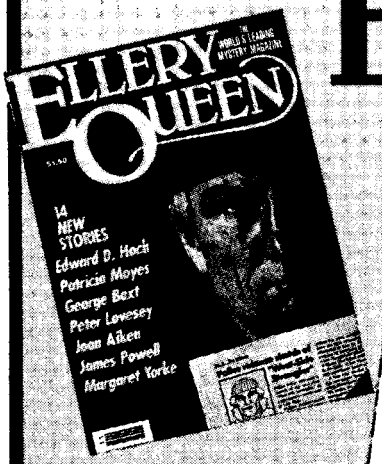

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

No jury would go for the notion that all by her little self, with a fractured wrist, Mrs. Kellman could have got her heavyweight husband up two flights and out the window. She had accomplished a multi-million-dollar murder by keeping it simple and her mouth shut afterwards. No fake suicide note, no alibi or timetable, no effort to account for why Kellman had gone up in the attic. A first-class piece of work, Sorenson rated it . . .

PHILADELPHIA STORY

by ROBERT TWOHY

Donna was nineteen when she began her career in Greenwich Village.

She had blue eyes, a waifish smile, a mop of ash-blonde hair. Some guys wanted to marry her but weren't what she was looking for.

This and that happened, she worked in Chicago, St. Louis, Houston, and other places—then in Miami she met a fat stockbroker named Barton G. Kellman, who at fifty-eight was ripe for marriage, she figured, if handled right.

She was thirty-four and hadn't saved any money. Kellman was what she was looking for.

She handled him like the pro she was and they got married and went to live in his old family mansion just outside Philadelphia. That was in 1966.

Donna fit right into the Philadelphia upper-class scene, doing all the civic and charity things a society matron should. What she did privately she was clever enough to keep from getting talked about.

So life was okay—but as years slid by, she began to have thoughts

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about how it would turn a lot better if Kellman was out of the picture.

Early in April '75, she had an affair with a stylish young stud who had expensive tastes and no scruples at all—which factors tied in neatly with the fact that just recently she had slipped on a wet pavement and fractured some bones in her left wrist.

Sometime during the night of Friday, April 25/26, Kellman, in his sixty-seventh year, went out an attic window of the elegant old mansion. He was found in the courtyard about 5:00 A.M. Saturday by the garbage crew. No servants had been in the house that night, for various valid reasons.

The widow stood to inherit a considerable fortune, Kellman being the last of his line.

A sharp young Assistant D.A. interviewed her, learning that she had gone to bed that Friday night about 11:00, her husband already asleep in his bed across the room. She said she had heard nothing until the garbage men started yelling and pounding on the door.

"Did Mr. Kellman ever talk about suicide?"

"Not to me."

"Was he in the habit of going to the attic at night?"

"Sometimes he might have."

"Was he given to blackouts or fainting spells?"

"I don't think so. You could check with his doctor."

"Why would he have opened a window, do you think?"

"Maybe to let in some air?"

She was concerned, responsive, and gave him not a shred of anything he could work up and throw back in her teeth as a lie.

He figured that she had let in an accomplice, and either or both had bopped Kellman as he slept, then together lugged him up two flights and put him out the window.

Any fingerprints or scuffmarks had been cleaned up and there was nothing to indicate that an outsider had been in the mansion that night.

The A.D.A., whose name was Sorenson, heard some rumors about possible affairs in her past, but got nowhere with that.

So he was stumped, as no jury would go for the notion that all by her little self, with a fractured wrist, Mrs. Kellman could have got her heavyweight husband up two flights and out the window.

She had accomplished a multi-million-dollar murder by keeping it simple and her mouth shut afterwards. No fake suicide note, no

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alibi or timetable, no effort to account for why Kellman had gone up in the attic. A first-class piece of work, Sorenson rated it.

Some months passed, and Donna became rich in her own name.

She sold the moldy old firetrap and went to England, returning to the U.S. about a year later with a new husband, a Britisher named Simon Blair, ten years her junior.

She didn't come back to Philadelphia but to New York. Sorenson had kept feelers out, knew about her marriage, and checked on Blair.

He found that he was a smooth lad who had lived by his wits and good looks, connecting with rich older women when the opportunity presented, playing a variety of other slick games, moving around—to the Continent, South America, the U.S. Everything indicated he had been in France in April '75, though as he was a wily type he might have slid out a side door and wound up somewhere else—like Philadelphia.

But Sorenson had no particular reason to focus on him. Anyone could have accompliced with Donna, and Blair could be only a bonbon she'd picked up afterwards, as a present to herself for a job well done.

He filed the case as one where you know who the star is, but not the supporting player—lacking whom, you can't stage a trial scene.

The Blairs came to the Bay Area in late '77, buying a demi-estate in the Lindenvale Hills district—three acres, a two-story adobe, wide lawn, some nice oak trees, a brick wall around—cost about $800,000, nothing special for the area. They settled in to find out if the California lifestyle was all they'd heard about.

They made friends soon enough, being rich, good-looking, and well up on all the right social maneuvers. His ancestry was a big plus, Peninsula matrons having a great fondness for Britishers with the proper accent. Soon they were going to parties and throwing them, and tripping away to fancy bashes in Pebble Beach, Santa Barbara, Marin, the Sonoma wine country. It was a bright whirl and Donna loved it after Philadelphia.

But inside a year, Simon began to get familiar yearnings—for new scenes, new games, new excitement. He'd rarely stayed in one place so long since splitting from his Liverpool home at age fourteen.

On the other hand, the living was easy. Donna bought him just about anything he wanted, as per agreement, and didn't keep him under any kind of tight rein. He could have affairs on the side, as

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she did, as long as they were kept discreet, superficial, and non-confidential. He was as wary and adroit as she was, and none of his ladies ever heard anything from him that could start them musing about his past.

But a good measure of freedom isn't freedom, and he missed it. He got fretful, started drinking more than he should, and one night in their living room he told her he had to get away for a while on his own.

"Just for a year or so," he said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'd worry."

"About what?"

"An accident. That you were lying alone, helpless, in some faraway place—maybe dying, or thinking you were. And suddenly an overpowering urge to unburden yourself comes over you—"

"You're afraid I'd confess?" He gave a whinny of a laugh. "You know I don't believe in any of that nonsense!"

"Not now. But who knows what you'll believe in your last moments? *I* don't—neither do you."

He jumped up, paced. "That's silly! I could have an accident right here in Lindenvale—what difference would it make where it happened?"

"If it happened here, I could do things."

"What things?"

"Whatever I had to. A private hospital—no visitors. Maybe nurses who don't speak English, appropriate sedatives. I could control the situation."

He flopped back in his chair. "I don't need your permission to go away—I'm not your slave."

She got a little smile. "Maybe you are. Maybe I'm yours. Think about it—what if it was *me* had the accident and lay dying and you were nowhere near to take charge of things?"

He stared. "Are you telling me you'd confess?"

"If you weren't here to take precautions, to protect me, to protect *us*—who knows, in my last moments, what I might say?"

Knowing a good exit line, she exited on that one—leaving him to chew on it.

Five years passed, during which Simon gained forty pounds fore and aft. His brown eyes lost their roguish glitter, his skin got pasty,

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some of his dark hair fell out. He got liver problems and heart tremors. He was forty-one and looked nearer sixty. He went to parties rarely now, and no one cared, including Donna—his sex games were infrequent and over in a hurry when they even got started.

Donna would rather he hadn't gone down the tubes but she was having too good a time to pay much attention. She stayed healthy and full of zip and hadn't put on two pounds since Philadelphia.

Dr. LaRue told her that if Simon didn't cut out the drinking he'd be main man at a funeral.

She thought, the sooner the better—and if his stroke or whatever wasn't fatal she'd be on the spot to handle the situation.

One night in February that year, a blodgy type took the stool to the left of a pert little package sitting by herself and asked if he could buy her another Black Russian. She said that would be nice.

He ordered it, and a gimlet for himself. He said that his wife had big blue eyes just like hers.

She was more interested in the English jacket he wore, the two high-grade rings, and the gold digital on his wrist.

She was twenty-eight though looking about eighteen, being small and quick, with chopped blonde hair and an uptilt nose that gave her a waifish look. Her blue pants outfit went just right with her eyes—no coincidence, as she knew how to dress among other things a girl learns if she's going to be good at her profession. Which Debbie was, though she hadn't saved any money to speak of.

She asked if the guy was English. He said actually he was. She said she'd guessed it by his accent. He asked her name and bought her another Black Russian and himself another gimlet.

Other young women were at the bar, all nicely dressed. A few had men beside them and others didn't. Some men sat at tables and watched the lone women, and now and then a man got up and crossed over to a woman, as the Englishman had done. The Zebra Room in Millbrae was known as an action place.

But this wasn't an action night, being Tuesday with a cold rain falling sullenly.

The Englishman said his name was John, which Debbie didn't believe and didn't care what it was. She figured the digital as $500 at least and the rings four or five times that.

She guessed him about sixty. He had jowls, dull brown eyes, and spotty hands that shook a little—but she preferred him to any of

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the other sports on hand, none of whom she had sized up as being worth much.

He asked if she wanted another Black Russian and she said she hadn't started on this one. He ordered another gimlet, saying to blazes with LaRue.

"Who's that?"

"My doctor. To blazes with him." He picked up his new drink and took down half, some dribbling down his chins.

He said he'd never seen a girl with eyes so much like his wife's. Nose, too—smile, build. It was startling.

"We really look alike, huh?"

"Well, no, but when she was your age you did. She has some photos from then. She's over fifty now, but still very pretty."

She guessed he wanted to talk about his wife, which was okay with her, she'd pick up on any subject a customer chose. "Is she English, too?"

"No, actually she's from Philadelphia."

"I've never been there."

"Nor I, either. Not since—" He stopped and his muddy eyes had a surprised look, like he'd said something he hadn't meant to—just for a second. Then he picked up on it fast. "Since I never had any reason to go there."

But he'd said "*Not* since," meaning that he *had* been in Philadelphia. What difference it made she didn't know—but anything a guy let slip out was worth keeping in mind. "Where's your wife now?"

"Tonight you mean? At a party—up in Woodside, I believe."

"Have you been married long?"

"Eight years. We met in London, and were married there."

"Your first marriage?" She was just talking, part of the job at this stage.

"Mine, yes. She was a widow when we met."

Something in his tone and the steady way he looked at her tipped her that he was lying—that his wife hadn't been a widow when they'd met and that they hadn't met in London.

"Are you from a high-up English family?"

"Actually, no. My father was a sausage dealer. I didn't care for sausages so I went off on my own—learned the correct accent, you know. But you don't care about that."

"I do, though." He'd told her three lies so far, not counting the phony name—that he'd never been in Philadelphia, that he'd met

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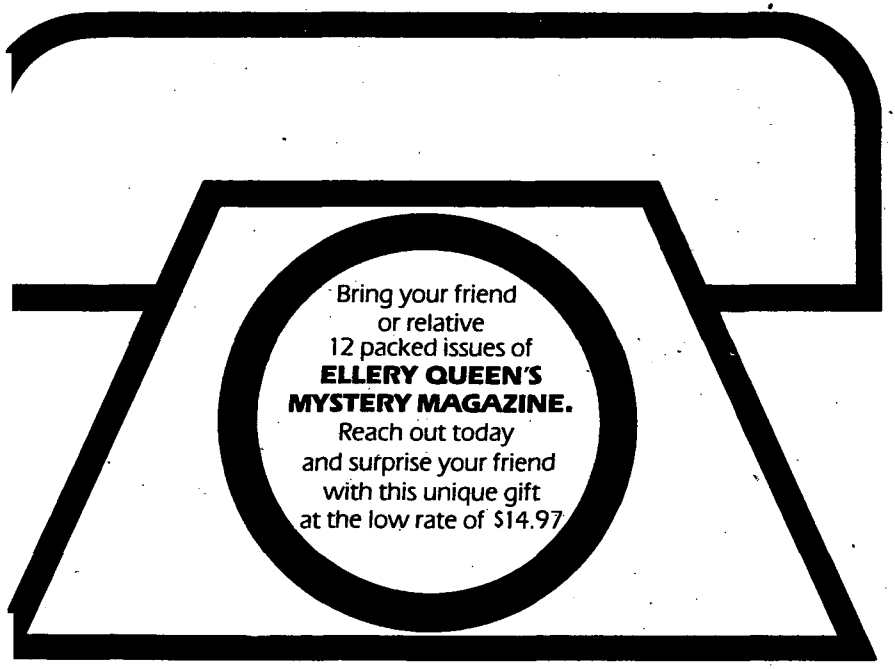

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his wife in London, and that she'd been a widow when he met her. She wondered if the lies tied together—if maybe he'd met his wife in Philadelphia when she was still married to the first guy, shortly after which the first guy died and the wife became a rich widow, then tripped off to London where she and this guy pretended to meet for the first time and got married.

It was past 1:00 A.M. Most of the couples were gone and the loners at the bar had packed it in for the night. Only two or three sports were at the tables.

The Englishman asked if she would have another Black Russian. He ordered it and another gimlet.

Debbie gazed at him and wondered what the rich widow had seen in him that made him worth marrying.

Maybe he'd been a lot different then, and wasn't as old as he looked. Debbie knew how fast a guy can slide downhill on booze.

"You said your wife is over fifty. You can't be anywhere near that."

"Actually I'm forty-one. But I'm in terrible shape."

"That's not true. You're a very nice-looking person." Debbie knew that flattery can be stretched to astonishing lengths and few guys will catch on.

But this guy shook his head and murmured, "I wish that were true. May I show you how I looked ten years ago?"

He took out his wallet and fiddled with flaps and eventually pulled out a couple of color photos, both showing a slim, foxy guy smiling like he knew he had loads of charm, which she bet he did then.

"You've put on a little weight, but otherwise you're about the same. What's that funny-looking building in the background there?"

She never found out because he grabbed his chest, his eyes slid up under the lids, and his blotchy face started jerking around.

He swayed on the stool and she grabbed his near arm and hung on.

After half a minute, he got steady and stopped jerking, and she let go as he seemed more or less back in control. The few people at the bar and the bartender were staring. Debbie smiled that it was okay and no need to call the paramedics.

The Englishman took some heavy breaths, shook his head, gave her a sad smile. "I'm frightfully sorry."

"It's okay. But you better call it a night. You don't look very good." His flabby face had a grey overlay.

He sighed. "I was so looking forward to—the rest of the night."

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"Me, too. But home's where you should be now. D'you have a car here?"

He shook his head. She signaled the bartender to call a cab.

He blew more sad breaths. "I kept you tied up and now everyone's gone." He was holding out a hundred-dollar bill. "Will this compensate?"

"You're nice."

"No. No, I'm not nice. I wish I were because you are but I'm not. I behaved very badly in Phil—"

He rubbed his lips and his muddy eyes slid away from hers. He mumbled, "I really have to get home."

A big man in a rainjacket with a hood strutted in the door and snarled, "Who wanted a cab?" The bartender thumbed toward the Englishman.

The guy slipped Debbie a wink and got a slight smile back—she knew him. He was Charlie Calhoun, one of the mid-Peninsula's hard-core drivers.

He growled at the Englishman, "Ready?"

The Englishman got up slowly, hand on his chest, and said to Debbie, "Can I offer you a ride home?"

She thought she might as well. She said goodnight to the bartender and let the Englishman lean on her as they went out the door.

Charlie had the back door of the cab open as they walked through the cold drizzle, slammed them in, waltzed around to the front, threw the meter, rasped, "Where to?"

"Wherever the lady lives."

Debbie said, "No, you should get home first." He really looked grey and sort of waxy. "I'll ride with you, then he can drive me home."

He gave Charlie a number on Screaminghawk Drive, in the Hills.

As they started south on El Camino, he was looking at her in a glazed way. "Did you mean it—that I still look a little like the photos?"

"Sure."

"That's nice. Not true, but nice." He took her hand in both his and held it on his thigh. Some softness showed through the glaze over his eyes and in his smile. She smiled back, thinking it was kind of a sweet moment that she hadn't expected.

He murmured, "I'm glad I met you tonight."

Charlie turned up Castle Drive, moving at a good clip, leaving

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flat ground, the lots getting bigger and the houses farther apart and back from the road the higher they got.

Debbie heard a snorty gasp and shot a look. The Englishman was clawing his chest and his face was jerking every direction. Just for a couple of seconds—then his hand dropped, his eyes rolled up, and he fell over, she catching his head as it hit her lap.

He lay not moving, face away from her, the visible eye up into the lid, profile like grey wax—she thought he was dead.

But she heard, low but clear, "Cold—remarkably cold."

She smoothed his hair. He said in the same voice, "Is this how it ends? No pain, just cold?"

She didn't answer. Charlie growled, "What's with him?"

The Englishman rolled his head a little under her hand. "Who's stroking me?"

"Me—Debbie."

"Am I in hospital? Are you the nurse?"

"Yes." She didn't know why, she just said it.

She glanced, saw Charlie's big eyes in the mirror, motioned that he should pull over. He scowled, looked for a clear place, slowed, slid off the road by some trees, and stopped gradually.

The Englishman said, "Who is the man who spoke?"

"Doctor LaRue."

"Is that you, LaRue?"

Charlie's big face hung over the back of the seat. Debbie gave him some quick nods and he grunted, "Yeah."

"You're a fraud, LaRue, do you know that?"

Charlie shrugged.

"But you were right."

Debbie stroked the Englishman's hair. "Are you in any pain?"

"I don't really know. Like pieces falling off. Extremely cold."

She slid off her jacket, laid it over him, rubbed his back, over his chest, down his side. He didn't move under her hands. His eye stayed up under the lid.

Debbie said softly, "Philadelphia."

He didn't say anything. She said it again.

"Is it time?"

"Yes."

He gave a weird sound, between a choke and a giggle. "The moment of truth . . . Donna was afraid. Who knows, she said, what one will do when the moment comes?"

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The weird sound again. Then, "Is it the moment, LaRue?"

Debbie nodded at Charlie. He snorted, "Enough of this—this guy is dying." He rolled around in the seat and reached for the mike on the dashboard.

The Englishman said in that low, clear voice, "I tapped Kellman on the head, just a little tap with the wrench—he was asleep, he didn't feel it. We got him upstairs—"

"You and Donna?" She heard a voice on the radio droning about something, watched as Charlie thumbed the button on the mike and snarled, "Stop babbling, you stupid jerk—92, this is 92, gimme a break, get off the air!" The voice went on droning.

"Got the window open while I held him up, then I let him fall. I didn't push—just let go and he fell. . . A game, a big prize if you win, exciting, the risk is the fun. . . He was the piece in the game that if you moved it upstairs and out the window . . . We could win or lose. We won, but not me, I lost. . . That's the funny part, it *is* funny, you have to laugh . . ."

He gave the weird sound, or started to, but it shut off suddenly.

The radio was off. Debbie look up and Charlie's face was over the back of the seat. He reached, felt the Englishman's chest, ran his hand up to his neck, felt around there, shrugged, looked at Debbie, and shook his head.

She slid out from under the head, laid it on the seat, pulled the shoulders so his chest was more or less up, turned the face up. She got to her knees, turned, and blew into his mouth like she'd seen on medic shows. She didn't expect it would do any good, but it was better to do it than not to.

Charlie heaved up so his hips were on top of the seat and hung there, massaging the Englishman's chest hard with both hands, now and then giving it a whack, glaring like he knew what he was doing, which he didn't, but like Debbie he was trying.

After a while, they laid off. Charlie gasped a while, then grunted, "That's it. Who is he?"

"Did you hear what he said about Philadelphia?"

"I heard."

She reached inside his jacket and got the wallet. She read from a credit card, "Simon Blair."

She counted money—a $100 bill, four $20s, a $10. "D'you want this?"

"Do you?"

"No. He already gave me a hundred."

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Charlie looked at the face like grey wax. "I don't want it."

She started to slide it back into the wallet.

"Wait a minute. Give me the ten. For the fare." The meter, which he hadn't flipped to waiting time, showed $6.60 for the trip so far.

"You have to drive me home, and he was going to pay for that." She slid off one of the twenties. He took it. She put the rest back, and the wallet back in the jacket.

Charlie was holding the mike, scowling at it, not thumbing the *send* button. He muttered, "The cops'll say we robbed him—that we took a bunch more and left what we did to fool 'em."

"You think so?"

"Sure, you know cops. Besides, I got about ten unpaid tickets."

He hung up the mike.

Debbie looked out at the bleak drizzle. "Let's drive him home. His wife's out, we can leave him on a porch or under something."

"What if there's servants?"

"Well, we're not going to just put him out here."

Charlie got in gear. They went on up the hill and he made some turns, slid down a drive between brick walls, past a wide lawn with some oak trees, and stopped at a two-story adobe that had lights here and there, which could be to fool burglars or could mean someone was home.

There was a covered porch in front with deck chairs, a marble table, and a chaise longue. Charlie drove close to it and they got the Englishman out and up three steps and onto the chaise longue. Nobody came out or yelled.

Debbie said, "It'll look like he walked out, felt weak, lay down, and died."

"We could get in big trouble."

"We didn't do anything. He had a stroke or something and died."

"Yeah, but you're not supposed to just walk away."

"We didn't. We drove him home."

"Yeah, but—"

"D'you want to call the cops?"

"No."

They rode on down the hill.

Charlie said, "They put a guy out a window. Who's Donna?"

"His wife, I guess."

He was quiet, working things out. Debbie shot looks at him. She knew that under his redneck act and the growls and grunts he wasn't a stupid person. He'd always treated her nice and she liked him.

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He crossed El Camino, drove to her mangy old building east of the tracks, stopped, leaned back, looking at her. "What's on your mind?"

"What's on yours?"

"It's your game, you tell me."

She looked at the rain a while. Then she said, "About ten years ago, Philadelphia—Donna was married to Kellman, and she and Blair threw him out a window so Donna would inherit. Nobody knows—just you and me and Donna."

"So what's on your mind?"

"I might go see her."

"She might just laugh at you, tell you so what?"

"She might."

"She might pull a gun on you."

"That, too."

"How much would you ask?"

"I dunno." She felt suddenly weary of it. "I'll sleep on it. I dunno what I'll do."

She opened the door. "How about you? What are you going to do?"

"Like you said—sleep on it."

"G'night, Charlie."

He flipped her two fingers, drove away.

At 2:30 that night, in the chic rural township of Woodside, a pickup piloted by a drunk doing sixty on a side street ploughed into a BMW midships and rolled it. The drunk came through fine, of course, but the BMW driver went to Peninsula Hospital with severe internal damage and died a little later.

Separate and unrelated deaths of a popular Lindenvale Hills couple on the same night made a front-page story in most of the Bay Area papers.

Charlie showed up at Debbie's neat but dumb little studio apartment toward evening Wednesday with the afternoon *Examiner*. She read the story, sitting on the couch. He sat in an armchair, watching her and humming.

She laid down the paper, put her head back, and closed her eyes. He went on humming.

After a while she looked at him curiously. "I know that tune—what is it?"

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He hoarsely crooned the words of Don Meredith's haunting Monday Night refrain— "Turn out the lights, the party's ohhverrr . . ."

She got a wry smile. "I guess it is. Well, it was a nice dream—that we'd wind up with a lot of money."

Then she gazed off, with a frown. "No, not so nice. It started nice, but—I dreamt I was being chased. I don't remember the details but I woke up—glad to wake up." She shook her head. "I dunno if I'd have gone to see her."

Charlie nodded. "That's about how I felt. Rich lady, she hires some guys—we wind up in a couple of oil drums in a gully somewhere."

"Yeah. Well, now we don't have to worry—about getting rich, or getting oil drummed." She tapped the paper. "No heirs, it says—who gets her money?"

"The state does, I guess."

"Including what we left in his wallet."

"No, probably the cops nailed that."

"I just didn't feel like taking it."

"Me, either. Too much like robbing the dead. In fact, *exactly* like robbing the dead." He looked at his Gemco watch and got up. "Time to go on shift."

She sat looking at him, big eyes and crooked smile. She looked waifish.

He kind of stood there. After a bit, he frowned, licked his lips, growled, "I'm not one of your high-roller pals. I'm just a working stiff."

"So'm I." She kind of stretched around a little. "But tonight I feel like just staying home. Cooking something nice, listening to some music, having a few beers . . ." She looked off, still with the smile, murmured something.

He said, "I didn't hear that."

"Busman's holiday?"

"What's that?"

"Well—" She was tracing a pattern with her finger on the couch cushion and studying it "—the busman has a day off, so what does he do?"

"Tell me."

"Goes for a bus ride."

Charlie said softly, "Really?"

"Uh huh." She left off pattern-making. "Not all the time—just sometime. When the mood's right."

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Charlie moved to the couch. She bounced up, trotted to the refrigerator. "Want a beer?"

"I never drink when I'm on my way to work."

"Glass?"

"No, can's fine." He took it, popped it, partly raised it—"Remember what Blair said?"

"What in particular?"

"That he thought he'd won the game, but hadn't—he'd lost it." He raised the can. "So here's a toast."

"To Blair?"

"No." He paused portentously, then, rolling his eyes ceilingward, intoned, " 'It isn't if you win or lose—it's how you play the game.' "

She smiled. They drank to it.

He said in normal growly tones, "That's a joke these days—but maybe it isn't, y'know?"

"Who said it?"

"I did. Just now."

"I mean who said it first?"

"I dunno. George Washington maybe, Howard Cosell—maybe Ronnie said it to Bonzo."

"I like it. Say it again."

He did. They drank to it.

"Q"

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Rob jogged up the incline, breath sobbing. He flattered himself that he'd made a good adjustment to the end of the world. Assuming the worst—that there might not be a living being for a hundred miles or farther—that survival depended on his foresight and mental agility . . .

THE CARING VOICES

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Rob Friml pulled a muscle in his back, but the fallen branch—even sawn in half it was heavy and unwieldy as a tree—was clear of the little feeder road down to the main highway. Fallen on his backside and still clutching scorched leaves that crumbled in his fingers like ancient papyrus, Friml laughed breathlessly. "Gotcha!"

The branch, defeated after an all-day battle to get it into the ditch, answered not a word—which was only to be expected but no less a relief. Rob also spared a wry thought over how proud he'd been once, living up here out of sight of valley tracts and poorer folk condemned to huddle there.

Really, Rob Friml was postponing the moment when he must rise. Beak-nosed, his blue-black hair styled fashionably Ancient, with a center part dropping it in wings over his ears, he looked rather like a disheveled raven. Legs straight out, boots indicating two o'clock, jeans trying to blot up a puddle of rainwater that somehow hadn't been converted to steam, he was hyping himself for the effort, reminding himself that he was pampered, sedentary. Abundant unearned money had bought him lack of fitness as well as desirable things. So he had every excuse for weariness. The dizziness was sheer imagination—*he wasn't ill.*

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Abruptly, another party made itself heard. The portable saw's power cell, no bigger than a speck of grit, had been jarred out of exhaustion when Rob hurled it aside for a final attack on the blockading branch. Now its theft light began pulsing in brainless accusation. The speech circuit, distorted, quacked: "Stolen from State facility! Police notified! Do not buy, barter, nor lease!"

Rob surged to his feet and dumped the saw into the ditch. Its message had been delivered every ninety seconds for the past seven and three-quarter hours—the whole time taken for him to trudge back here from the road-crew store at the foot of the mountain, lugging his booty, and carve tree wreckage into manageable chunks.

"Silence is golden," Rob chanted, watching bubbles seethe up from the saw's submerged motor housing. Then he shivered and looked away—it was too much like drowning.

The thing had nagged him crazy, but it would also have refused to amputate his fingers either by accident or operator-desire. All the machines were that way, full of good will and irritating as hell, since one couldn't talk back.

Friml—millionaire and, technically, a petty thief—set off up the feeder road toward his home. It didn't look homey and it never had. Built like a bunker to conserve energy, little more than its solar-panels roof showed above ground. The solar panels were opaque from charring, and saplings in the yard remained as slender pillars of charcoal ready to break at a touch, a gust of wind. He'd been lucky, if that was what it was.

Drunk as usual, he'd passed out in the games room, sixty feet down in the guts of the rock. Under the pool table at that, where he had crawled to retrieve a dropped bottle.

Emerging at first light, expecting slow recovery from a hangover, he'd discovered a nightmare—evidence of flash and firestorm: photographic impressions of his two Skeeters printed on the white wall of the garage elevator bay. He'd forgotten to send them down the previous evening. The actual vehicles were smears of melted metal and beads of fused glass.

Charcoal posts where his elegant army of cherry saplings had been arrayed, grass and foliage turned to black velvet or in random swathes and swirls, browned, lax, dead. No communications—vid, audio, computer—though the house itself was alive. It had independent power and would for a century or so, thanks to the lead-sheathed nuclear seed planted safely the far side of the mountain.

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Far from a century or so, Rob guessed that he might last a week here if he was very careful, very frugal. He'd been away a lot and had let his replenishment routines slip. The kitchen freezer was an expensive chest of near-empty chilliness and there were materials for maybe three solid meals in the refrigerator. The suppliers' drone carts had been due today.

Water, Rob reminded himself, trying to recall what he'd drunk so far. Canned orange juice—liquid vitamin C to combat the hangover. God be thanked, he'd set the coffee down untasted, hurrying outdoors on seeing what had befallen his yard, courtesy of the 'veillance screens.

He had no idea where the house's water was obtained. If it hadn't been tainted this morning, it probably would be by now. And he was thirsty. Now he'd thought of it, Rob found he was thirstier than he'd been in an age.

No problem for the moment. Down in the wine cellar there was rank after rank of imported bottled spa water from a time before all this. Another item of cargo for the car.

Rob's pace slowed while he worked things out. "Hasten slowly" must be the motto. The car was an antique, an indulgence, but a sturdy one designed to carry five passengers and their luggage. Weights involved must be somewhere in the handbook.

So—water as well as food and makeshift weapons. He'd start a checklist before setting out. That tree could prove a blessing. He had been intent on dashing off to Wragge Corners first thing this morning, but that might be rash.

Weapons. He'd left the shipwright's laser out by the car in a jumble of tools upended from his hobby chest in fury at finding that none of them was the saw he needed. There'd been no evidence so far of a need for weapons, but all the same . . . Come to that, on learning that the Skeeters were no more he'd brought the car up from its basement vault and left it outdoors, key in the ignition—when he'd spotted the fallen branch.

Breath sobbing, Rob jogged up the incline. He flattered himself that he'd made a good adjustment to the end of the world. Assuming the worst—that there might not be a living being for a hundred miles or farther—that survival depended on his foresight and mental agility. Find the laser, clumsy yet potent, and *never* be out of arm's reach of it—

"Jesus," he said softly and without blasphemy, skidding to a halt. The car stood there, smugly gleaming and fifty years out of con-

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text. There was a growth of some sort on its absurdly high roof. Then Rob realized the thing wasn't a growth—it was a squirrel, sort of. Yellow eyes the wrong color, looking far too large because its fur was on end, chattering as best it could through pink froth erupting from its jaws.

His muscles knotted with dread, Rob broke a fingernail scrabbling among the tools, cowered and fired as the insane animal launched itself. He'd always had a good eye. There was a spitting crackle just before the laser muttered, "Charge exhaust, inoperable one hour, mark."

Rob hadn't eaten since the previous evening. At the savory waft of roasted flesh, his palate stung and gushed and his stomach rumbled before he understood the implications and jackknifed, retching.

When something nudged his calf, Rob screamed, whirled, and triggered the useless laser.

"Mr. Friml," the hired hand said, "you have terminated a unit of a protected mammal species. Your offense has been reported."

Idiotically, Rob glared his dislike and snapped, "The hell, it would have *killed* me, you dumb garbage can!"

The hired hand was a giant thimble, a knee-high outdoor toiler with crawler treads and a hardware-store display of limbs ranging from shovel to hair-fine sensor fingers for assessing and dealing with seedlings. Most of that array was smeared with soot and ash. Stubbornly optimistic, it had been trying to tend the yard. Obviously it had been under repair in the machine maintenance levels during the attack.

"Further use of power tools forbidden until outcome of present offense."

"Big deal," Rob told it balefully. It was silly, giving hired hands personalities. Their voices sounded different because of their shapes and functions, but the locked-away computer in the house was speaking every time.

Despite trouble in dealing with hard shiny surfaces, the hired hand had repacked the hobby chest, closed the lid, and was dragging it away. "Protected-species offense reported." Another hired hand rolled into view and hurried to help. Rob wasn't sure of its proper function, but from the beachball shape and waterproof housing it would be pool maintenance or something to do with the artificial trout stream.

"You guys ever hear of World War Three?" Rob yelled. He was

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aware of silliness now but it helped let off steam. "Hey, Fats, I'm a real desperate character! I stole a saw this morning, too."

"Admission noted. Please supply serial number of stolen implement to facilitate reporting of offense," the beachball brayed.

Instead, Rob swore and strode to the car. He slapped smuts and dust from his jeans and automatically tidied his hair before sliding behind the steering wheel. The car was special—he ought to get on with preparations indoors, he knew, but he needed consolation.

He was sitting in a 1993 GM MicroMax limo, discovered in a scrap yard and lovingly restored a decade later for little more than seven times its bygone sticker price by a specialist company. The law decreed computer control, but the monitor console was disguised as a period push-button radio and pressure pads in the seat triggered the simulated odors of leather and a hint of gasoline. It was decadent nostalgia from hood to trunk.

"Fasten seatbelt," the car chided. On impulse, Rob had turned the ignition key. He never doubted that it was ready to go. A Skeeter was more practical—providing one's Skeeters had not been vaporized—so this relic had been driven only a handful of miles since restoration.

Before Rob could touch the key, the purring motor cut out and the car said, "Cancel instruction. Mr. Friml, it is wasteful to operate engine before notifying destination."

Private use of fossil fuel was regulated by central government, BuVee in Washington. *Whatever happened to Washington?* Frowning, Rob wondered whether hysteria was gifting him with a streak of gallows humor.

"Damn and blast," he mumbled.

"That is not a notification."

"Okay! Wragge Corners, this state, southern segment, 100-klik radius." Probably a waste of breath—the car checked with BuVee and normally clearance or refusal came back within fifteen seconds.

As Rob expected, he was still waiting three minutes later. Again he turned the key. "Listen, this is an emergency. Understand? A—a medical emergency."

"Mr. Friml, if journey commencement urgent, alternative transport advised."

"Unavailable," he snapped. "I'm ill, hear me? Let's go." Not that he could, before spending time gathering gear and loading the car. No harm in giving a sense of urgency, though.

The car thought it over before speaking sweetly as ever. "Mr.

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Friml, your physical state optimal as of latest assessment. Please submit to reappraisal at this time before repeating request."

Naturally, it had checked with the house, where his well being was monitored as part of the routine. The machines looked after him, it was implicit. Rob Friml laughed bitterly, pounding the steering wheel. Wragge Corners, protected in a cup of the mountains, might have surviving human life. In any case, its stores would be whole or relatively undamaged treasure troves. He had to get there. But not, it seemed, by car. And he had found, rescued, lavished money on this goddamn pile of junk—it *owed* him!

It was chance, but the car could have been responding to his reproach on the steering wheel. "Mr. Friml, at this time you should know: attempt to evade BuVee regulations by false statement of emergency is a serious offense, calling for either-or fine of U.S. dollars thirty thousand, remedial therapy of non-voluntary nature. Please be advised that declaration of emergency following physical checks deemed inadvisable."

Rob's self-control snapped. He took the warning as a threat. "Further," the car continued blandly, "two non-related offenses—theft, destruction of protected mammal species—outstanding at this time."

Rob got out and, grinning savagely, shut the driver's door with exaggerated care—having set the gear lever in N. Okay, buddy, you won't work for me, I'll fix you. I made you, jerk. I can ruin your day.

The old, pre-war Rob Friml was shocked by his plan. That part of him wasn't concerned about wasted money—it never had been. But it did wring its hands and plead that the car might be useful. BuVee could still reply, allow the trip.

But "Like hell," he grunted, shoulder to the trunk, bootsoles slipping as he gritted his teeth and heaved. Gravity and momentum took over, allowing him to straighten, sweatily, guiltily triumphant as the old car slid down the incline.

The thimble-shaped hired hand, cumbered with dead birds it had been harvesting, set off in clumsy pursuit, churning ashes and cinders. The car was wailing something. Had it been a newer model, it would have been able to hit its own brakes.

The drive, landscaped in an S-bend, made an abrupt curve a quarter mile from Rob's vantage point but the car did not. It sailed out into thin air, still bleating, vanishing over a rock ledge to impact with a rending crash.

Rob whooped out a rebel yell, but his heart wasn't in it. Nobody

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alive—and that might be a pitifully exclusive little club—could build a genuine vintage GM limo. Any fool had the power to destroy one.

The hired hand stopped a wary distance clear of him, tracks scrabbling to maintain its position on the slope.

"Mr. Friml, willful destruction of fossil fuel is an indictable offense. Willful destruction of personal property is a psych-anom of serious magnitude. Together with two recent-previous offenses and possibility of third concerning statement to BuVee, this constitutes personality-disturbance trend. Findings notified to relevant terminals. Please await arrival of MedPsych unit."

The dead birds shook forlornly as it spoke and did its balancing act, cremated feathers rustling against its weatherproof hide.

"Tell me about it." Rob almost laughed at the farcical warning. No helicoptered medical team would descend to detain and treat him. He was on his own. He headed for the house.

The hired hand pursued him, though discreetly, its ghastly little posies swaying. "Mr. Friml, please do not attempt to evade MedPsych unit. Please stay where you are."

Rob spun round in a rage. "Or what? Huh? There is no law, dummy! No MedPsych squads with butterfly nets, no BuVee, no nothing any more! Just me—and I'll do what I damned well want! What can you do about it?"

Nothing, from the hired hand's silence. Rob stared at it until the squat thimble turned awkwardly, nearly overturning, and went back to its futile work.

Stomach rumbling once more, he shivered. Darkness was flooding in and he was at once chilled and parched.

Get indoors, eat and drink. Above all, think. Make lists, figure ahead. Travelers' lore floated into his head. Select essential gear, pile it, halve the pile, take less than that.

Chances were that he'd have to hike the entire way to Wragge Corners. There was an alloy-frame rucksack in his den. He would pack food and safe water for a three-day march. Make it five, if he could carry that much, build in a fail-safe factor.

A corner of his mind whimpered to stay safe indoors. Only it wasn't safe any more. The woods were full of animals that used to be unthreatening and the food and bottled water would run out quickly.

Rob gulped drily, hurrying to the front door. He pelted down the stairs to the entryway niche, flicking a spring-loaded cover to expose the sensor plate and press his palm—unique key—on it. The plate

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glowed greenly and there was a faint hum as the house became alert.

How easy to be a criminal! Though that was a dead concept. Once civilization perished, criminals ceased to exist. Lacking muscle to impose the law—the machines, after all, could only talk—laws were imaginary.

His momentary euphoria dispersed in a gust of panic, dread. The door hadn't opened.

The entry phone sputtered, very like an embarrassed person's throat-clearing. Rob Friml, weeping, afraid of the dark and what it held, trapped on the wrong side of an immoveable barrier to everything needed for survival, sank to his knees. His hands were clamped over his ears.

He understood how the machines could impose sanctions against him to uphold the law. He just couldn't bear to hear them explain about it.

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a *NEW* Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri story by

JOSH PACHTER

A lovely second story in Josh Pachter's new series about Bahraini policeman Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri. The illustration of The Beer Drinkers, which really is the best known and most valuable of the Dilmun seals, was drawn from a photograph by Piet Schreuders, a Dutch graphics artist whose book, Paperbacks U.S.A., *the author translated from Dutch into English. It was published in America by the Blue Dolphin Press . . .*

THE BEER DRINKERS

by JOSH PACHTER

Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri was bored.

I'm a policeman, not a wetnurse, he thought morosely, and my place is out on the streets, in the *suq*, where the action is—not stuck here playing nanny to a pack of silly children.

It was well that Chaudri kept such thoughts to himself. Were he to give them voice, to speak the frustration that was in his heart, it would mean the end of his right to wear the proud uniform of a *mahsool*, the end of his career, the end of his four-year stay in Bahrain.

For these four boys were no ordinary children. They were the eldest sons of four of the most powerful and influential men in the Arabian Gulf—or "Persian" Gulf, as the Western infidels and the damned Iranians insisted on calling it—and one did not call such boys a pack of silly children unless one was eager to give up the respected position that Chaudri had worked so hard to win and to return in disgrace to the bitter life of a day-laborer in Karachi.

It was the third and final day of the second annual meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the heads of state of the six member

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nations—the Emirs of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, the Sultan of Oman, the King of Saudi Arabia, and the President of the United Arab Emirates—were cloistered away with their prime ministers, defense ministers, and aides in a magnificently appointed conference room in Manama's shiniest, most elegant new hotel. They had come together to discuss the coordination of security forces in the region, the establishment of "common market" agreements between their several nations, the Palestinian question, the ramifications of the Iran-Iraq war, the advisability of a joint demand for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, the adoption of uniform passports, and other issues of mutual importance.

Four of the senior ministers had brought their first-born sons to Bahrain with them, and it had fallen to Mahboob Chaudri to take care of the boys while Their Highnesses conferred, to tour them around the island's points of interest, and to keep them away from trouble. And, *most* important, to keep trouble away from them.

It was an important assignment—a vital one, a mark of his superiors' total confidence in his abilities. It was also, thought Chaudri, an incredible bore.

Day One of the conference had been filled with arrivals and receptions and parties and dinners. The ministers' children had been included in all these functions and Chaudri had been but one small cog in the complex machinery of the security arrangements. By Allah's grace, all had gone well. There had been no incidents of any kind—not at the airport, not during the motorcade into the city center, not at the hotel or the various embassies where the welcoming activities had taken place.

On Day Two, the official meetings had begun. That morning, Chaudri chaperoned the four youngsters on a tramp around the Portuguese Fort and the ruins of the Bronze Age and Stone Age cities, accompanied by a reporter and a photographer from the *Gulf Daily News* and the president of the Historical and Archaeological Society. After a luncheon at the home of the Saudi ambassador, hosted by that dignitary's charming and beautiful wife, they had driven south into the desert for a busride through the newly opened Al-Areen Wildlife Preserve. The children had enjoyed themselves immensely, but Chaudri, of course, had been on duty all day and had not had a chance to eat lunch. By the time they reached Al-Areen, he was hot and hungry and tired, and the chatter of the boys and the penetrating stink of the Arabian oryx had given him a headache.

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This afternoon, *insh'Allah*, would be the end of it. Another hour or so here at the National Museum and he could herd his charges back across the causeway from Muharraq to the mainland, deliver them safely into their fathers' arms, thank one and all for the honor of having been permitted to serve them, and with a bit of luck catch a ride back to the police barracks in time to take a hot bath before dinner.

Children!

And, to be fair about it, it wasn't *only* the children. There was also that irritatingly bouncy British reporter with her constant barrage of foolish questions and her obsequious little Indian photographer constantly shooting off his flashbulbs in Chaudri's eyes. And, this morning, the well meaning but terribly long-winded assistant curator of the museum, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Samahiji, whose lecture on Bahrain's history had been underway for what felt like the last ten hours and seemed certain to go on for at least the next fifteen.

"One of the earliest hymns known to mankind, written over four thousand years ago, when the pyramids of Egypt were new, by a Sumerian in what is today the south of Iraq. It sings the glories of the ancient land of Dilmun, site of the biblical Garden of Eden, whose capital—as the excavations carried out since 1953 have conclusively proven—was here on the island of Bahrain. 'The land of Dilmun is holy,' the hymn begins, 'the land of Dilmun is pure. In Dilmun the raven does not croak, the lion does not kill. No one says, my eyes are sick, my head is sick. No one says, I am an old man, I am an old woman . . .' "

The voice droned on and on. Megan McConnell, the reporter, scribbled furiously in her notebook. The Indian photographer snapped exposure after exposure of the assistant curator, the honored guests, the colorful displays of artefacts on the walls. The children themselves, trained since infancy in the art of diplomacy, seemed to be listening attentively, though who knew what thoughts they were thinking as they stood there in their flowing *thobes* and crisp white *ghutras*.

Behind the intent and solemn mask of Mahboob Chaudri's olive face, *he* was thinking that at least the ethnography room had been worth looking at, with its spears and swords and *khunjars*, its models of stilt houses made all of palm fronds and pearl-divers' boats rigged out with canvas sails, its mannequins in native dress—especially the bride, in her magnificent gold-embroidered *thobe nashel* with its billowing sleeves that folded upwards to cover her head, the elab-

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orate gold ornaments around her neck, the intricately hennaed hands. The camel saddles and tools and pottery and glassware and porcelain, the orchestra of Arabic instruments, the full-size reproduction of the kitchen of a villager's thatched hut and the carpets, mirrored walls, silken pillows, and curtained four-poster bed of the room in which a well-to-do couple would spend their wedding night.

Shazia, his own dear wife, would enjoy that section of the museum, if no other. Shazia . . . It had been almost two years since his last home leave, since he had last heard her speak his name, last touched a hand to her delicate cheek and kissed her lips and felt the soft caress of her sweet and golden arms.

" 'Let the sun in heaven bring her sweet water from the earth,' " Ibrahim al-Samahiji's monotone pushed the image of his wife to the far edge of Chaudri's consciousness. " 'Let Dilmun drink the water of abundance. Let her springs become springs of sweet water. Let her fields yield their grain. Let her city become the port of all the world.' "

The hymn was over at last, and the assistant curator smiled determinedly and led them off to a small room at the back of the building, a room with a single waist-high display case taking up most of its floor space and old-fashioned black-and-white maps of the Middle East covering its walls.

"About forty years ago," Sheikh Ibrahim told them, "a small number of a previously unknown type of round stamp seal began to be found both in Mesopotamia and in cities of the Indus River valley. Dating to about 2000 B.C., they were clearly 'foreign' among the cylinder seals of Mesopotamia and the square seals of the Indus. No one knew where they came from. But the recent discovery of some fifty seals of this type in the Barbar temples and in Cities I and II at Qala'at al-Bahrain, together with debris of seal-cutting workshops, shows us that this seal type is in fact native to Bahrain. These so-called 'Dilmun seals' are the main evidence for Bahrain's trade connections four thousand years ago with the whole of the Middle East and they are this country's greatest, most valuable archaeological treasure."

Chaudri leaned forward to see into the case. It was filled with row upon row of small stone buttons, carved with a confusion of geometric shapes, crude human figures, images of goats and gazelles and flowering trees. Beneath each stone was a square of grey clay bearing the impression of the seal that lay above it. A magnifying panel was

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set into grooves along the top and bottom edges of the case's surface so that the seals could be examined more closely.

But that arrangement was not good enough for the four young boys.

"There's so much glare from the overhead lighting," complained Jamil, the fourteen-year-old son of a prime minister, "I can hardly see them."

"And the inside of the case is dim," Mohammed added. He was sixteen and his father was a minister of defense.

Talal, also sixteen and also a prime minister's child, was the one who came up with the idea. "Open the case and take them out," he proposed, though to Mahboob Chaudri's ears it sounded more like a command than a suggestion.

"Yes! Yes!" came Rashid's high-pitched agreement. At thirteen, though he was the youngest of the boys, he was the most powerful; his father was a Crown Prince and the heir to his country's throne. "I want to hold them, to feel the texture of them in my hand. If these are Bahrain's proudest treasures, I want to learn to know them."

Sheikh Ibrahim looked staggered. Delicately, he began to explain: "That would be very, ah, irregular. You see, the air in this display case is temperature-controlled and dehumidified. If I open the case, the sudden change in temperature and humidity could damage the seals. And if you were to touch them, the oils on your fingertips and palms could—"

"Well, of course," one of the boys interrupted softly, "if you don't want to give us the pleasure." He allowed his voice to trail off and turned away from Sheikh Ibrahim.

The assistant curator swallowed nervously. The small room had gone deathly silent and the atmosphere was thick and stuffy with tension. Even the photographer had stopped his incessant picture-taking. The dismayed look on Megan McConnell's face was clear: what a story this was, and what a shame that she would never be allowed to publish it. For the first time that day, Mahboob Chaudri found himself truly interested in the events going on around him.

Sheikh Ibrahim took a deep breath and smiled. "The oils on your fingertips and palms might counteract the effect of the changes in temperature and humidity," he went on smoothly, "and I would be grateful for the opportunity to investigate that possibility." He pulled a ring of keys from the pocket of his ankle-length *thobe*, selected one of them, and unlocked the back of the display case.

The tightness in the room evaporated and Chaudri relaxed. He

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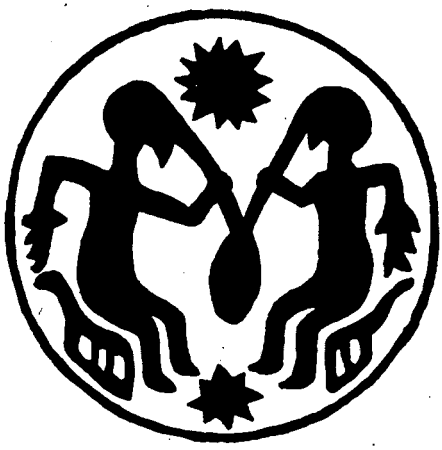
felt that he had at last begun to understand the intricate complexities of statecraft, and the ease with which a simple disagreement between individuals could quickly escalate into an international incident. Instead of feeling sorry for Ibrahim al-Samahiji, for the way the distinguished assistant curator had been put in his place by a child, he found himself admiring the Sheikh's tactfulness and diplomacy instead.

He remembered an Arabic saying he had heard shortly after his arrival in Bahrain. *Both lion and gazelle may be sleeping in one thicket*, a grizzled greybeard in a teashop on the fringes of the *suq* had told him, puffing wisely at the thin stem of his bubbing *narghile*, the crude clay waterpipe no longer smoked by anyone other than old men, *but only the lion is having a restful sleep*. He had not understood the proverb at first, but he knew now what it was like to be a gazelle amongst the lions.

Sheikh Ibrahim had removed several trays of seals from the glass case in the center of the room and was carefully lifting the stones from their velvet niches and passing them out to the eager boys. Once again the air rang with teenaged chatter and the photographer's flashbulbs popped almost continuously.

"What's this one?" asked Mohammed, balancing a seal on his upturned palm. "It looks so funny."

Chaudri was standing close enough to make out the design on the



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stone: two male figures carved in simple outline, seated on identical chairs or stools, the sun shining above them and, strangely, a star at their feet. He had seen this image before, reproduced on countless T-shirts and wooden plaques and gold medallions. It was the only one of the seals with which he was familiar. What made it funny was that the noses of the two seated men were ludicrously long and joined in a V at the top of a large oval shape which hung between them. Each figure held one arm behind him, fingers weirdly misshapen and splayed, and supported his trunklike nose with his other arm.

"They are called The Beer Drinkers," Sheikh Ibrahim informed the boys proudly, "and that is the best known and most beloved of all the Dilmun seals. The two men are sharing a skin of mead, drinking it through long spouts or straws—which most people see instead, comically, as enormous noses. Although," he admitted, "there are also those who call this stone The Musicians and claim that the two figures are playing a primitive sort of bagpipes and not drinking beer at all. In any case, I think I can safely say that that small stone which you hold in your hand is the greatest and most important of Bahrain's ancient treasures."

The children were suitably impressed and handled the seal with reverence. Megan McConnell made a swift sketch of it in her notebook and the photographer finished off a roll of film shooting it from all imaginable angles. "What were these seals used for?" the reporter wanted to know, her drawing complete. "Were they purely decorative or were they functional as well?" Her associate was busy changing film and Chaudri glanced surreptitiously at his watch. Another twenty minutes and it would be time to go.

"Oh, absolutely functional, Miss McConnell." Sheikh Ibrahim rubbed his hands with delight at the chance to launch into another lecture. "Each of the seals is unique. Four millennia ago they were used as we use our signatures today. A craftsman marked each sample of his handiwork with his own distinctive seal to show that *he* had produced it and no one else. A scribe used his seal to sign documents, a nobleman to make his decrees official, a merchant to verify transactions. The poor, of course, had no need for such seals, but anyone with valuable property or possessions would identify them as his own by—"

The bolts of photographic lightning resumed, and the soliloquy went on.

And then, at last, Sheikh Ibrahim began to fit the Dilmun seals

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back into their velvet trays, matching each with the clay impression just below its waiting position. Megan McConnell snapped her notebook shut and tucked it away in her shoulder bag. The Indian photographer clicked off a few final shots of the group. The four boys milled about impatiently, ready to be under way. Mahboob Chaudri's stomach growled and he prayed that the rumble had been audible to none but himself.

Then Ibrahim al-Samahiji gasped hoarsely, and when Chaudri looked there was stark horror etched into the lines of the assistant curator's weathered face. He was pointing a trembling finger at an empty hole in the last velvet tray. "The Beer Drinkers!" he cried brokenly. "It's gone!"

Mahboob Chaudri was no longer bored.

Bahrain's greatest treasure was missing—*stolen* and not lost, as a careful check around the small room quickly revealed. The prime suspects were four young men whose fathers were so high-placed that even to *question* their sons would be the gravest of insults and the idea of searching the boys for the stone was absolutely unthinkable. And he had less than a quarter of an hour before it would be time to reboard the bus for the brief ride back to the mainland.

No, Mahboob Chaudri was not bored.

But he would have given a great deal to *be* bored once again, instead of mired in this, the most hopeless, desperate situation of his career.

Sheikh Ibrahim was gaping at him. Megan McConnell had her notebook out again and was scribbling in it furiously. The Indian photographer was taking pictures of *him* now, and Chaudri could imagine the caption that would appear in the *Gulf Daily News*: "Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri of the Public Security Force," it would say, "totally baffled by the theft of the most important relic of Bahrain's ancient history."

Luttay gaye, he thought bitterly. What a disaster!

The four boys, meanwhile—Jamil, Mohammed, Talal, and Rashid—were talking softly amongst themselves. Chaudri would have sorely liked to have been able to overhear their conversation. The McConnell woman and her photographer had been working all the while that the seals were being handed around; there had been no time for either of them to have pocketed The Beer Drinkers. And it was inconceivable that Sheikh Ibrahim himself had stolen the stone: the thing would be impossible to sell, and if—like certain mad

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collectors—all he wanted was the knowledge that a unique and priceless piece was in his possession, why, this piece *was* in his possession, safe in its niche in his museum. He could enjoy it safely and privately whenever he chose.

No, the awful truth was that the only valid suspects in the case were the eldest sons of four of the GCC's strongmen, and there was nothing he could do about it. He could not search them, he could not ask them to turn out the pockets of their *thobes*, he could not ask any question which implied that one of the boys was guilty while admitting that he did not already know *which* one. For if the three innocent youngsters saw that their integrity was in doubt, at least one of them would be sure to report the matter to his father.

Chaudri didn't really want to think about the consequences.

If only he had been watching more closely, if he had *seen* which of the four had taken the stone.

If only.

If only he had a magic box, like the Grand Vizier in the old fairy tale. It had been one of his favorite stories as a child: the Emperor's wonderful golden ring is stolen and the Vizier is ordered to uncover the identity of the thief. He gathers the suspects outside one of the palace's smaller apartments and instructs them to enter the darkened room individually, unaccompanied by guards. In the center of the room they will find the Vizier's magic box, and they are to put one hand into that box as deeply as it will go, then leave the apartment by a second door, where the Vizier himself will be waiting for them. The box will have no effect on the hand of an innocent man, but its magic will stain a criminal's skin a damning black.

So, one by one, the courtiers enter the darkened room. One by one, they leave by the opposite door. And one by one, the Grand Vizier examines their hands.

At last "This is the criminal!" he cries.

"But my hands are clean!" the accused man protests.

"Exactly," smiles the Grand Vizier. For his magic box is not magic at all, merely an ordinary wooden box filled to its brim with soot. The innocent suspects, their consciences clear, have obeyed the Vizier's instructions and come out of the room with blackened hands. Only the guilty man, fearful of the box's magic, has disobeyed, and his immaculate hands reveal him to be the thief.

If only *I* had a magic box, Mahboob Chaudri thought sadly. If only I had been *watching!*

But—but wait. *He* knew he had seen nothing, but he was the only

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one in the room who possessed that knowledge. And perhaps they *did* have a magic box of sorts there with them, after all. Yes. Yes. It would be a gamble, but it was all he could think of. And if the Indian photographer was clever enough to catch on and play along, there was a chance it might work.

In any case, it was worth a try. Even if it failed, the situation could hardly get any worse than it already was.

Chaudri drew himself up to his full height, calmly projecting an air of what he hoped would pass for confidence. Less than two minutes had passed since Sheikh Ibrahim had announced the disappearance of the treasured seal. The Sheikh, the boys, Megan McConnell, the photographer—they were all turned toward him expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

He spoke. "I saw who took the stone," he lied. "You thought my attention was elsewhere, but you were wrong. I saw you take it and I saw where you hid it."

He watched their faces hopefully, praying for the guilty boy to give himself away.

But it was not to be that easy.

And it was too late to back away from it now. He had committed himself. He could only go forward.

"Your first mistake," he went on, "was coveting that which does not belong to you—a minor sin, true, but a sin all the same. Your second mistake was stealing the stone, repaying Bahrain for her hospitality by robbing her of her dearest treasure. *That*, of course, was a graver sin and a more serious error. Your third mistake was larger still: you allowed me to see you as you claimed The Beer Drinkers for your own."

The silence in the room was hot and stifling in spite of the museum's air-conditioning.

"But I am only a simple policeman," Chaudri admitted, his voice now humble. "If I accuse you, here or in front of your father, it will be my word against yours. Even if the stone is found in your possession, then perhaps you will say I planted it there in an attempt to discredit you. My word against yours—and your word, obviously, will be worth much more than mine. What I need," said Mahboob Chaudri firmly, "is proof."

Now is the moment, he thought, pausing to let them consider the things he had said. Understand me, my friend, and give me your help!

"And I *have* proof," he said, "for you made yet a fourth mistake,

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and that was the largest error of all." He whirled to face the stocky little photographer and pointed a finger straight at the man's startled eyes. "*You*," he intoned dramatically, his mind imploring the other to comprehend, "*you* saw the theft take place as well—not only saw it, but snapped a photograph of it with your camera at the very instant it happened."

The Indian blinked nervously, clearly confused.

Don't deny it, Chaudri thought fiercely. You can help me trap the thief!

"I—" the man stammered.

It's not going to work, Chaudri realized. He doesn't know what I'm talking about.

And then the swarthy Indian countenance cleared. "Why, yes, sir," the man said firmly. "That is completely true. I did."

Chaudri flushed with joy. Praise Allah for those beautiful, blessed words! "I don't want to cause an embarrassing incident," he told the children confidently. "All I want is for The Beer Drinkers to be returned. So I have a suggestion to make." He moved to the panel of light switches by the door—the only entrance to the room—and swung the door shut.

"If all four of you will gather around the display case, one on each side of it, I will turn off all the lights in this room. In the darkness, the boy who took the seal can set it back down on top of the case without being seen. I will leave the lights off for one full minute. If the stone is there when I turn the lights back on, then I will return you all to your hotel and nothing further need ever be said about what has happened here today. Sheikh Ibrahim, is that acceptable to you?"

The assistant curator bobbed his head eagerly. "Yes, of course," he agreed. "All I want is the seal!"

"Miss McConnell?"

To her credit, the reporter understood him and nodded her acquiescence immediately. That would mean two marvelous stories lost in a single day, but she was a seasoned enough journalist to recognize that some tales are better left untold.

"And you, Mr.—?"

"Gogumalla, sir," the Indian supplied. "Solomon Gogumalla."

"Mr. Gogumalla, will you swear to say nothing about this incident and to destroy the incriminating film in your camera without developing and printing it if The Beer Drinkers is returned?"

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The little photographer swallowed noisily. "Yes, sir," he promised. "Of course. I won't say a word. You can rely on me."

"Well, then." Chaudri turned to the boys.

They themselves seemed willing to cooperate and Chaudri deferentially arranged them around the sides of the glass display case. Ibrahim al-Samahiji, Megan McConnell, and Solomon Gogumalla he guided to positions along the wall farthest from the case so they would be well out of the way.

"Now I will shut off the lights," he repeated, "and I will leave them off for sixty seconds."

With hope and prayer in his heart, he hit the four switches and plunged the room into darkness.

The room was empty of light and sound. Mahboob Chaudri held his breath and listened for the faint rustle of cloth that would be a hand reaching into a pocket, and for the sharp click of stone touching down on glass.

But there was nothing, no rustle, no click, no noise of any kind.

And time floated by, as slow yet intense as one of the Emir's golden peregrine falcons drifting steadily across the sky in search of its prey.

Then the sounds began. There was a cough from the corner of the room which could have come either from the assistant curator or the photographer. There was the abrupt crack of a joint flexed after too long a time held stiff. There was a shuffle of impatient feet and a long, tired sigh—and the rapid pounding of Mahboob Chaudri's own anxious heart.

"I will now turn on the lights," he announced when he judged that a full minute had gone by. He felt for the switches in the darkness and pressed them all at once. When his eyes had readjusted to the brightness, he looked hopefully to the surface of the display case in the center of the room.

There was nothing there.

His bluff had been called.

Disgrace, dismissal, and banishment back to Pakistan. His children would be ashamed of him, his wife despise him, his friends abandon him. It was over, all over—his career, his happiness, his life.

He would see his assignment through, of course—escort the children back to their hotel, then go straight to the Police Fort and

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prepare a letter of resignation. He could at least do *that* much, and quit before they could throw him out . . .

No! He was Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri—not a quitter, not a coward. He was a police officer with a job to do, a case to solve, a criminal to apprehend.

His bluff had failed, true—but before he would admit defeat he would play one more card, the only card that was left to him.

He would bluff again.

"Very well, then," he said, "you have chosen to hold onto the stone, which leaves *me* with no choice at all. I will have that film developed and I will present the incriminating photograph to your father. Mr. Gogumalla, may I have your camera, please?"

"Certainly, *mahsool*," the Indian replied. "But may I offer you my services, as well? I have a small darkroom of my own, right here in Muharraq. Allow me to develop the roll for you and to make a large print of the picture in question, which I can present to you very quickly and with my compliments."

"A kind offer," said Chaudri, pleased, *and a nice touch*, he added silently. "But in a case like this one, it would be best to have our own men do that job." He put out his hand for the camera, but the photographer held onto it. "Don't worry about your camera," Chaudri reassured him. "Our specialists will be quite careful with it."

Gogumalla shook his head stubbornly and took a step backwards, and at that moment Mahboob Chaudri realized what had really happened to The Beer Drinkers.

"I should have seen the truth immediately," Chaudri wrote to his wife Shazia late that evening. Usually his weekly letters were filled with questions about the children and wistful dreams of the future, when he would have saved enough money from his salary to return to Pakistan for good. But this week he had news to report.

"Miss McConnell and the Indian, Gogumalla, were busy working while the theft was being committed" he wrote, forming the Punjabi words slowly and carefully, "and I was certain that neither of them could possibly have been guilty. Instead of looking only at the fact that they were working, though, I ought to have considered what exactly it was that they were doing. The woman was writing and drawing in her notebook all that time, and the photographer was taking pictures. But at one moment Gogumalla stopped to put a fresh roll of film into his camera, just after shooting a series of

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exposures of The Beer Drinkers. And as it turned out, new film was not all that he was loading into the body of his camera—he hid the Dilmun seal there as well, in the hollow cavity inside the lens.

"It was not in his mind to commit a crime when he set out today—he was just a simple photographer on assignment. But when Sheikh Ibrahim explained how valuable the stone was and he saw the opportunity to take it, the temptation was too much for him to resist.

"The poor fool—he was too ignorant, Shazia, to know that, for him, The Beer Drinkers had no value at all: unique and instantly recognizable as it is, there is no way he could ever have sold it.

"Of course, none of the photographs he was taking after the theft were any good, with The Beer Drinkers lodged between his lens and his film. If I had accepted his offer to process and print the roll himself, he would have gone off to his darkroom, taken the seal out of the camera and hidden it, and come back to me with the sad story that the film had accidentally been ruined. And since he knew that I knew there really was no incriminating picture, he doubted that once we had left the museum I would even bother asking him to do the developing and printing. When I carried my bluff to the extreme, though, and insisted on taking the camera myself, he saw that the game was up and confessed.

"He is out on Jiddah now, the prison island, in a cell awaiting trial, and I have been commended by my superiors for solving the case without insulting or embarrassing the four boys, who by now are back in their home countries and tucked safely away in bed. Sheikh Ibrahim has promised me a golden reproduction of The Beer Drinkers as an expression of his gratitude. When I receive it, I will buy a chain for it and send it to you as a memento of your husband's triumph.

"Not really a very satisfying triumph for me. If I hadn't happened to remember that old fairy tale and think of the Indian's camera as a modern-day magic box, Solomon Gogumalla would now have the seal and I would be—

"Well, the less said about that the better.

"It is getting late, dear Shazia, and I must sleep. Kiss the children a hundred times for me and think ever fondly of your own

"Mahboob"

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a *NEW* Jonas Pickett story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

Jonas found the Queen in one of the cells below the police station. She was examining her bed critically. She said, "I've slept on harder places than this. I suppose I'll manage. I'd welcome one more blanket."

In his New York Times *review of Michael Gilbert's latest novel,* The Black Seraphim, *Newgate Callendar pointed out that his first book was published in 1930: "Today, a half century later, his vision has not faltered. Perhaps that is because he never has been content to specialize in one kind of book. He has written procedurals, spy novels, short stories, courtroom dramas (in real life he is a lawyer), and just about anything in the mystery field. Perhaps it is the variety that has kept him on his toes."*

And his readers on the edge of their chairs . . .

VIVAT REGINA

by MICHAEL GILBERT

Mrs. Grandfield was standing at the window of her breakfast room. The sun was shining from the blue sky of a midsummer day. It was cheering the hearts of the holiday makers who crowded into Shackleton-on-Sea during the summer months. They had been disappointed by the bad weather of the previous week and had now hurried to the beach, the parents to doze in deckchairs, the children to build sandcastles or waste their money at the row of stalls which lined the esplanade.

All these people were happy. Mrs. Grandfield was not happy.

The pleasure of the crowd meant nothing to her. Her house, Old Priory Lodge, with its ten acres of garden, its paddock, and its mead-

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ows lay nearly a mile from the town on a little used side road. From where she stood, she had a bird's eye view of her domain. She could hear the puttering as their gardener-chauffeur, Clegg, drove his motor mower across their smooth lawn. She could see the well stocked flowerbeds and the neat yew-hedge at the foot of the lawn. To right and to left lay her property. Only over the hedge, where the side road moved away from the curve of the hill, was an acre of common land. On it, only too clearly visible, was the cause of her discontent.

Six gypsy caravans.

To someone less personally involved, the sight might have seemed attractive. They were motor caravans, but their body-work had been built in the old-fashioned gypsy style, with windows and chimneys and, in two cases, an open balcony at the back. Some almost naked toddlers were playing a game which seemed to consist of climbing up and falling off the front steps of one of the larger caravans. In the background, two older boys were tinkering with an ancient motor car.

"Probably stolen," said Mrs. Grandfield.

Charles Grandfield, who had come into the room at that moment, said, "What's that, Nora? Stolen? What's been stolen?"

"I was remarking that the car those two gypsy oafs are dismantling is probably stolen."

"What makes you think that!"

"They're all thieves and liars. A feckless, shiftless crew. They've got no right to be here."

"It's common land, my dear."

"How do they know that? Mr. Porter once told me that any unfenced land beside the highway belongs to the Corporation. Since you're Chairman of the Council, doesn't that mean it belongs to you?"

"I'm not quite clear about that," said Mr. Grandfield. "But since it seems to worry you, I'm going to find out. I'm seeing Porter this morning, and I'm going to have a word with Chief Superintendent Whaley. There may be some local bylaw they're infringing."

"I'm sure Whaley will be helpful if he can. They're like rats. Once you let them in, they're all over the place. Two of the older boys spend all their time on the beach handing out deckchairs to old ladies who are probably afraid not to tip them. And the old creature who seems to run the gang has a booth on the front and pretends to tell fortunes."

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"The Queen of the Gypsies," said Mr. Grandfield with a slight smile. "Yes, I've heard about her."

"In the old days she'd have been tried as a witch and burnt at the stake."

"We can't quite do that sort of thing now. But don't worry, you may find that the law has a card or two up its sleeve."

When he reached the police station he found that Chief Superintendent Whaley was away on leave and he had to deal with Detective Superintendent Queen, whom he found to be less immediately cooperative. He sympathized with Mr. Grandfield's feelings, but pointed out that until the gypsies broke the law they were hardly a police problem.

"Actually," he said, "they seem to be quiet sort of people. We haven't had any complaints from people in the town."

"What about those two boys who wander about on the beach extracting money from people for handing out deckchairs—which are Corporation property, anyway."

"Oh, you mean Ben and Billy," said Queen. "Do you know, when my wife took the kids down to the beach the other day she was so pleased with the new arrangement that she gave—Billy, I think it was, you can hardly tell them apart—a shilling over and above the hire fee."

"For what?"

"For fetching her deckchair from the store and setting it up where she wanted. And, I rather suspect, for smiling whilst he did it. The old arrangement was that you had to fetch it yourself from that old storekeeper, who looked as if every day was a wet Monday."

"I reckon those two boys are potential dangers."

"Well, we'll keep an eye on them," said Queen. "If they step out of line, you can be sure we'll clamp down. But in my view the gypsies are a lot less objectionable than that terrible fun fair which turns up in August with merry-go-rounds and steam whistles and makes the whole place almost unlivable in. If you could use your influence on the Council to get *them* refused a license you really would be doing us a good turn. Some of the stall holders are very doubtful citizens."

This was a skillful, and successful, effort to divert Mr. Grandfield from his immediate grievance. He said, "I know what you mean, but it's not an easy problem. The Council's split on it. Agreed, the fair's a nuisance, but it brings in a lot of trade and that makes the com-

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mercial lobby on the Council support it. However, I'll think about it."

Living where he did, a steam whistle a mile away was a lot more acceptable to Mr. Grandfield than gypsy caravans a hundred yards from his own dining-room window.

Having reached an age when most solicitors would have been considering retirement, Jonas Pickett liked to take things easily. His practice in Shackleton had grown considerably during the twelve months he had been there, but he found that he could usually deal with his mail by midmorning. He then devoted half an hour to coffee and gossip with whatever member of his staff had time to spare. That morning it was his secretary, Claire Rayner, who seemed to be suffering from a suppressed joke.

She said, "You'll never believe it. But Sam's had his fortune told."

Sam Conybeare was the eighteen-stone man mountain who acted as commissionaire and did anything else round the office that had to be done.

Jonas said, "You mean Sam actually paid a visit to the Gypsy Queen?"

"Paid it, and paid for it. He's a complete convert."

"What did she tell him?"

"She read his past and his future in a milky glass globe. She said that she saw him, in his youth, performing prodigious feats of strength on different fairgrounds."

"Since she has no doubt been following the same circuit for many years she'd be likely to know about that."

"You mustn't start to sow doubts in Sam's mind. If you do, he won't have faith in her predictions for his future."

"Which were?"

"She said he's going to be lucky in love."

Jonas guffawed. "What an admirable prediction. It could mean anything. Good technique, though. Let's persuade Sabrina to visit the gypsy's lair."

The fact that he referred to his partner, Sabrina Mountjoy, by her first name was an indication that their conversation was informal. In the same way, Claire called Mr. Pickett "Jonas" when they were alone, but "Mr. Pickett" when third parties were present. By such conventions the decencies were preserved.

"If you think she's a fraud," said Claire, "you ought to visit her yourself. Then you could expose her."

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"There are several excellent reasons for my not doing so." Jonas ticked the reasons off on his fingers as though Claire was an opponent in court who had put forward a weak argument. "First, I don't think she's a fraud. I think she's a very astute performer. Secondly, if you attempted to assert that the sort of vague predictions she makes rendered her subject to the law you'd have to prosecute all the so-called astrological experts who daily fill the less reputable organs of the press with their nonsense. Thirdly, and finally, I could not myself consider taking any action against her since she is my client."

"If she's your client, why don't I know about it?" said Claire indignantly.

"Because it all happened when you were up in London at the end of May. She came to see me because she wanted to be quite sure, before they moved their caravans onto this particular piece of ground, that they couldn't be turned off it. I wish all my clients were as prudent. Most of them consult me *after* they've done something stupid."

"And they can't be?"

"Not as long as they behave themselves. Old Priory Lodge belonged to Colonel Croxton. It had been in his family for generations. Grandfield was his nephew, or some such relation. He got it because both Croxton's sons were killed in the War. Just before he died, the Colonel dedicated this little patch of land by the road to the Corporation on condition that they made it available to travelers. I got a copy of the deed from the Town Clerk. It was drawn up by Croxton's London solicitor, Marcus Apperly. Very competent man. Must be retired or dead by now."

"Then I suppose he was older than you," said Claire. This was unkind, but she was still ruffled by their earlier exchanges.

"A *lot* older," said Jonas firmly. "He stipulated in the deed that the Council should draw up regulations for the use of the site, which he would approve. Provided that campers and other people who used it obeyed the regulations they couldn't be turned away. As a matter of fact, since the Corporation set up that camp site near the sea, with piped water, electricity, and all modern conveniences, I gather the Priory Lodge site has been very little used. Mostly by scouts and occasional hikers."

Claire said, "I've never seen it mentioned in any of the publicity handouts. Is there a notice board or something drawing people's attention to it?"

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"I don't think there is."

"Then how did the Gypsy Queen know about it?"

"I expect she saw it in her magic globe," said Jonas.

At about this time, Mr. Grandfield was getting much the same advice from Mr. Porter. Porter and Merriman were the oldest and most respected firm of lawyers in Shackleton and Cedric Porter was their senior partner. He spoke with massive authority.

He said, "I have studied the terms and conditions laid down by Colonel Croxton in his deed of dedication. I will not conceal my view that he was ill-advised to leave these conditions as imprecise as they are. To take one point, they impose no actual time limit on the travelers camping there."

"Good God," said Mr. Grandfield, "do you mean that those gyppos can put up there permanently?"

"I would suppose that after a period—a considerable period—it would be possible to commence an action to eject them on the grounds that the deed refers to 'travelers' and this would not be an apt description of people who had used the encampment for, say, six months."

"Six months!" said Mr. Grandfield. "My wife will be a raving lunatic long before that! Is there *nothing* we can do?"

"If they break the regulations, or make themselves objectionable in some way, an order for their removal could be made."

"But suppose they behave themselves? That old witch who calls herself the Queen—she's seen a copy of the rules. She got them from Pickett."

"From Jonas Pickett? Indeed."

The way in which Mr. Porter said this indicated his opinion of the latest addition to the legal firms in Shackleton.

"The others seem to regard her as their leader. If she tells them they've got to keep the rules, they'll keep them."

"There is another possibility. I do not imagine that these people are particularly wealthy. The offer of a suitable sum of money might induce them to move off somewhere else."

"And come back again a month later and look for another payment."

"Bribery is essentially deplorable and rarely successful," agreed Mr. Porter, "but I can think of no other solution at the moment."

Mr. Grandfield refrained from comment on this moral pronounce-

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ment. A further possibility had occurred to him, but it was not one he could discuss with his solicitor.

As he left the office, he remembered that he had promised his wife to buy her a dozen eggs, and he made his way along the crowded main street to the big supermarket which had recently opened up on the corner site. It had adopted the French habit of supplying wheeled trolleys for its customers, but since Mr. Grandfield had only the one purchase to make he ignored the trolleys and made his way straight to the grocery counter, where he picked up two cardboard cartons, each containing, according to the label, six eggs, new laid, large size. One of the cartons seemed to be coming apart, so he placed it very carefully on top of the other and turned to make his way back to the entrance.

As he did so, two trolleys whizzed past him abreast of each other, one of them nearly running over his foot. He recognized the youths who were propelling them. One was Ben and the other was Billy. Both were grinning.

"Watch where you're going," he growled

"Sorry, guvnor," said Ben. "But it's those outsize feet of yours."

"If we'd known you were here," said Billy, "we'd have had the floor cleared."

An assistant walked up to see what was going on.

"I advise you," said Mr. Grandfield loudly, "to keep a close eye on that pair and to check their purchases very carefully."

Claire, who was shopping on the same aisle, said equally loudly, "And I should advise you to take no notice of such a slanderous and totally uncalled-for statement. As a senior councilor, I should have thought you'd have known better."

Mr. Grandfield had been turning gradually redder. Now he lost his temper entirely. He said, the words frothing as they came out, "I suppose you're angling for work. Well, let me tell you that if you or your shyster employer choose to start proceedings against me for slander you may find you've bitten off more than you can chew."

He made swiftly for the door, forgetting, in his fury, that he had to pay for the eggs. The young lady at the checkout shouted after him, "Excuse me!"

Mr. Grandfield swung around, slipped on the polished floor, and came down with a crash. One of the fragile egg boxes disintegrated.

"It was a splendid sight," said Claire. "Eggs everywhere and people

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rushing up, some to help, but mostly to stare. It was like a pantomime."

On return to the office, she had found Jonas and Sabrina Mountjoy arguing about a bill of sale. They suspended the argument and listened with interest.

"He's a silly little man," said Mrs. Mountjoy.

"He's more than silly," said Claire. "He's vicious. Do you realize he actually accused Mr. Pickett of being a shyster?"

"Did he, though?"

"In front of a dozen witnesses."

"You could found an open-and-shut action for slander on that, Jonas."

"No," said Jonas firmly. "I've spent thirty years and more keeping my clients out of court. I don't intend walking in there myself."

"Billy and Ben weren't helping matters. They both joined the scrum round the fallen hero and managed to break the other box of eggs."

"That wasn't wise," said Jonas. "And I hope the Queen tells them so. She's a remarkable woman. You ought to go and see her, Sabrina."

"I have," said Mrs. Mountjoy. "I was so impressed by Sam's account that I went down first thing this morning. You have to get in early these days to get a session. There's usually a queue."

Claire said, "Most of them just come to look at the blackboard."

"Blackboard?" said Jonas.

"She's got one outside the booth. Every morning she chalks up a Message from the Stars for Today. Sometimes it's just general stuff. Politics or the stock exchange or what the weather's going to do. But she had a real scoop when she gave them the winner of the Derby. Everyone's been following her tips since then."

"She did that?"

"Well, more or less. Her message was, 'You'll need dark glasses to look at the Derby winner.' Which, you remember, turned out to be Sunshine. Good odds. Third favorite. Twelve to one."

"I seem to remember," said Jonas, "that the favorite was Searchlight and the second favorite was Arc Light."

"You musn't be cynical about her," said Mrs. Mountjoy. "Some of these old women have got a real gift. Insight or foresight, I don't know which. You ought to consult her yourself."

"You haven't told us yet what she predicted for you."

"She didn't actually predict anything, but we had a very inter-

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esting talk. She really is a remarkable person. In any classification of humanity I'd put her several classes ahead of Mrs. Grandfield."

"You mean she's a lady?"

"That's an old-fashioned description. But, yes, I think I do. She's got all the gypsy patter and slang, but occasionally, when she forgot to act, I thought there were signs of a good education somewhere in the background. Do you remember Matthew Arnold's poem—the one about the scholar gypsy?"

"Vaguely," said Jonas. "Was that the one about the student who got fed up with Oxford and decided to spend the rest of his life studying gypsy lore and living with them?"

"Right—and I shouldn't be at all surprised if that isn't what this old girl did. If she's in her fifties now and really has been with them for twenty or thirty years, she must have been quite young when she—I don't know quite how to describe it—"

"Dropped out."

"No. Drop-outs are negative characters. She struck me as a thoroughly positive person. She told me about the other members of her little tribe. Three complete families. An older pair with no children, a father and mother with a lot of kids, and a widow with the two boys, Ben and Billy."

"Is the old girl related to them?"

"She was a bit uncommunicative about that. But there's no doubt she's the boss."

"The Queen."

"In view of certain recent developments," said Mrs. Mountjoy drily, "it might be more appropriate to describe her as the Prime Minister."

The plan which had been at the back of Mr. Grandfield's mind when he left Mr. Porter's office was simple if old-fashioned—when you can't buy someone off, scare them off. The humiliating scene in the supermarket had stiffened his purpose. And he had the right person for the job. Clegg, in the course of a varied career, had been, so far as anyone knew, a soldier in the commandos and a bouncer in a nightclub. He had also, quite possibly, had a number of less reputable jobs. Mr. Grandfield had never inquired. Old Priory Lodge was an isolated property and it suited him to have a man who could look after it and be responsible for its security. He and his wife liked to go to bed early. Clegg had a room on the ground floor at the back of the house and attended to the locking up.

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When he got home, Mr. Grandfield explained to Clegg what he wanted.

"Throw a scare into them?" said Clegg. "Yes, I guess I could do that. They're none of them much more than a shilling in the pound. I'll walk down now."

The only people visible in the gypsy encampment when Clegg got there were Billy and Ben, sitting on a step of the caravan. Billy was reading a copy of the local newspaper. He looked up as Clegg approached, grinned, and said, "I see the price of eggs is going up."

Clegg moved up until he was within easy reach of Ben and said, "I've got a message for you and the rest of your crowd."

"I'll pass it on," said Ben.

"It's very simple. Get out before you get into real trouble."

"What sort of trouble might you have in mind?" said Ben.

"These caravans of yours. They'd make a nice bonfire, wouldn't they? Suppose someone happened to be careless one night with a tin of petrol and a match?"

"I've heard of that sort of thing happening," said Ben. "Nasty dangerous stuff, petrol."

"Next point," said Clegg, moving in even closer. "I've got friends around here. Fishermen, some of them. Rough types. You know. They might feel that you lot needed a lesson."

"A lesson in what? Manners?"

"This sort of lesson," said Clegg. He swung with his right. It was a quick vicious blow, but it met only the air. Ben had slipped off the steps on the far side. Now he moved out into the open.

"Talk about lessons," he said, "someone ought to give you a lesson in boxing, granpa. When you're going to hit someone, you don't want to send them a postcard telling them you're going to do it."

Clegg lumbered out after him. He recognized that Ben was much lighter on his feet than he was but hadn't half his weight or muscle. All he needed to do was to get his hands on him. The best tactics would be to provoke him. He said, "All right, my boy. Stop running away, let's see if you can hit."

Ben came dancing toward him. Clegg took a step back to give himself distance. It was a mistake. Billy had come up quietly behind him and was crouched on the ground. Clegg fell over him and landed flat on his back.

Before he could get up, Billy had grabbed his hair, pulling his head back, and Ben had landed on his stomach with a thump that

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drove all the breath out of him. He now had a knife in his right hand and the point of it was resting on Clegg's exposed throat.

"Well?" said Billy. "When does the lesson start?"

Clegg said nothing.

"Come along," said Ben. "We haven't got all day."

"Let him up," said the Queen.

Billy let go of Clegg's hair and Ben removed himself. Clegg scrambled to his feet. He said, "It's lucky you turned up, lady. If that boy had touched me with his knife he'd have been in bad trouble. As it is, I could have him for assault."

"Stop talking nonsense," said the Queen. The tone of command was so compelling that Clegg, who had opened his mouth to speak, shut it again.

"You made a threat. I heard it. A threat of arson. That's an indictable offense. I expect your master sent you to do it. Now get back to him and give him this message. If he wants trouble, he can have it. But we shan't start it. You understand? All right, off you go."

Clegg felt that he must assert himself, but could think of nothing to do or say. He turned on his heel and stalked off. Ben and Billy looked serious. Ben said, "What do you think he's going to do now?"

"What a silly question," said the Queen. "We can't possibly tell what he's going to do. On the other hand, we can make our own plans. I've had an idea."

As she explained her idea, Ben and Billy stopped looking serious and started to grin.

Billy said, "That'll tickle him up."

"Something has got to be done about it," said Mr. Grandfield. "I won't tolerate it. I'm being made a public laughing-stock."

"I don't quite understand," said Mr. Porter cautiously. "What blackboard are you talking about?"

"If you don't know about it—" Mr. Grandfield was starting to get cross "—you must be the only person in Shackleton who doesn't. This person—this person who calls herself the Gypsy Queen—has got a blackboard outside her booth on the front. She chalks up some nonsense every day. The Voice of the Stars."

"A lot of newspapers—" began Mr. Porter.

"I know, I know. To start with it was harmless nonsense. It was an advertising stunt. It attracted customers. Now it's not harmless at all—she's using it to pillory *me*."

"In what way?"

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"When I heard about it, I got my gardener to go down there. He copied down the last two or three. Apparently it's been going on all week."

"Have you got them there?"

Mr. Grandfield produced some pieces of paper. He said, "I told Clegg to copy them down."

Mr. Porter adjusted his glasses and studied the latest pronouncements from the stars. Each one started in the same way. "Big Chief Great Meadow he say—" followed by a short message. The first was "Pride cometh before fall." The second "Who walketh softly does not trip." The third "Egg on face causes ridicule." Long training enabled Mr. Porter to remain completely serious. He said, "The first two—er—texts appear to be generally accepted axioms. The third one, I confess, I don't entirely understand."

Mr. Grandfield said, "They all relate to an unfortunate incident in one of the shops. I had bought some eggs and tripped and fell as I was carrying them to the door."

"I see." Mr. Porter restudied the messages. "And you think they refer to this?"

"Of course they do. Great Meadow. Grand Field. It's perfectly obvious. People were sniggering about it at the Rotary Club yesterday. It's—it's slanderous! You've got to stop it!"

"It's a difficult problem. To start with, since the words are written, they would constitute a libel, not a slander. And it is true that the definition of libel is an untrue statement which causes hatred, ridicule, or contempt."

"Ridicule—exactly."

"But which of these statements would you say was untrue?"

Mr. Grandfield stared blankly at the paper. In the end he said, without attempting to conceal the fury in his voice, "Are you telling me there's nothing I can do about this?"

"You could report it to the police, I suppose. But I hardly see what they could do."

"Thank you—for nothing," said Mr. Grandfield and stormed out. In his hurry, he left the papers behind him. As Mr. Porter read them again, he allowed himself a single cautious smile.

On Wednesday at nine o'clock in the morning, the station sergeant came into Chief Superintendent Whaley's office and said, "It's Mr. Grandfield, sir. He wants a word with you."

Whaley groaned. He had been talked at by Mr. Grandfield on the

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Monday and telephoned twice on the Tuesday. Personally, he liked and approved of the Chairman of the Council, but his patience was being tried. He said, "I suppose it's those damned gypsies."

"I understand it's something more serious this time, sir. There's been a robbery."

"A robbery." Whaley felt more cheerful. This was something he could deal with. "When and where?"

"Last night, sir. At Old Priory Lodge. Superintendent Queen has already gone out there to take charge."

"Show Mr. Grandfield in."

Mr. Grandfield said, "I knew something like this would happen." Like the Superintendent, he sounded almost glad that matters had been brought out into the open. "They've gone too far this time."

"Have you any reason to suppose it was the gypsies who did this?"

"Of course it was the gypsies. It was a grudge job. They took the only things I really minded losing. The Croxton silver. A tray, two salvers, a loving cup, two cream jugs, a set of forks and spoons. All marked with the Croxton arms. There was a lot of other silver, but it hadn't been touched. If it wasn't done out of spite, why should a thief take the marked silver and leave the unmarked stuff?"

"That's certainly odd," agreed Whaley. "Very odd: Leave it with us."

That afternoon he discussed it with Superintendent Queen.

"It was a simple job," said Queen. "A pane of glass cut out of the dining-room window, which opened on a catch. The silver was in an unlocked cupboard in the sideboard. People who keep valuable stuff like that really deserve to have it stolen."

"I believe they had great confidence in that man of theirs. Clegg. Did he hear nothing?"

"He seems to have slept through it. Not that there would have been a great deal of noise."

"No prints?"

"Only the ones you'd expect."

Both men thought about it.

"It's plain to see what's in Mr. Grandfield's mind," said Queen. "There's no love lost between him and the gypsies. They were on the spot. They *could* have done it."

Whaley said, "The only real indication that it was them and not a bunch of professionals from Brighton or Portsmouth is that they

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took the marked silver and left the unmarked. Professionals would never have done that."

"There is one thing more, sir. We've had a communication. Someone must have pushed it through the letter box very early this morning. It was here when we arrived."

The message was written in pencil in block capitals. It said, THE SILVER IS BACK OF THE GYPSY'S STALL.

"I suppose it means that stall she tells fortunes from."

"I imagine so." Queen said it without enthusiasm. In the course of his career he had received many anonymous letters. Most of them had led to nothing but trouble. He said, "Hardly enough to justify a search warrant."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Whaley. "Yes, what do you want?"

It was the station sergeant. He said, "I thought you ought to see this entry, sir." He had the Station Incidents Book in his hand. "Constable Seddon put this in when he came off duty this morning."

Whaley looked at the book. It was a volume in which officers recorded all matters, important or unimportant, which came to their attention during the course of their duty. It was an innocent-looking book, which had caught and convicted an uncommon number of criminals.

Whaley read the entry and said, "I'd better hear it from Seddon himself. He should be back at the station by now."

Constable Seddon was a middle-aged man, running a little to fat, happy in his work and devoid of ambition. He said, "It was when I was patrolling the Marine Parade, the bit that runs along behind all those little shops and booths. It was pretty dark, but about halfway down, on the left, I thought I saw someone climbing over the railing. I shouted to him to stop and he took to his heels."

"Him? It was a man?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sure it was a man. But that's about all I could see. I'm afraid—" Seddon smiled deprecatingly "—that he was a lot faster than I am. When I got to the end of the passage I could just see him pedaling off on his bicycle. Up the road. The one that goes past the golf club."

"And past Old Priory Lodge," said Whaley.

"That's right, sir."

After Seddon had gone, Whaley said, "If we're going to act at all, we'll have to act quickly. If one of those boys lifted the silver and

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deposited it in his mother's back room, you can bet it isn't going to stay there long."

Queen nodded agreement. He said, "We'll need a warrant." Whaley considered the three magistrates who made up the Shackleton Bench. Admiral Fairlie was Chairman. He was a bit of a stickler for forms and precedents. Mrs. Crossman had recently been appointed and was an unknown quantity. He said, "Laurence Deickman's our best bet. Apply to him. And if he gives you the warrant, we'll execute it at once."

At six o'clock that evening, two detectives called on the Queen. She had just dealt with her last customer and was locking away the black cloth and the white globe with its carved stand in a cupboard at the back of the room.

When they showed her the search warrant, she stood quite still. Her eyes, a piercing blue in her sun-browned face, were fixed more on the men than on the paper they held. When she said nothing, they shifted uncomfortably. One of them said, "You understand, lady—we're just doing our duty."

She said, "I understand perfectly. Of course you may search where you like. There's only this cupboard in here. It's unlocked. And nothing in the back room but two old tables and some empty cardboard boxes."

The Croxton silver was in a sack, under a pile of cardboard boxes.

At about half past seven, Sam Conybeare, answering the bell, discovered two distraught boys on the doorstep. He listened to them, blocking the door with his massive body. He said, "Mr. Pickett's in his flat upstairs. He's changing to go out to dinner. He could see you tomorrow."

"You don't understand," said Ben. "They've taken her away. They're locking her up."

Sam could feel the anguish in the boy's voice. He said, at last, "All right. You can come up. One of you. The other stays here."

Jonas listened to what Ben had to say, canceled without much regret a dinner date with fellow solicitor, Tom Bledisloe, and walked round to the police station. Superintendent Queen seemed to be expecting him. He said, "Certainly you can see your client if you want. She's made no statement of any sort. She's been charged with receiving stolen goods and will appear in front of the magistrate tomorrow."

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"Are you opposing bail?"

"Normally, of course, we should. Receiving's a serious offense. In this case, we've decided not to. We don't think she'll run away, and if she does she won't get far."

And if she does, said Jonas to himself, it'll be a convenient admission of guilt. Aloud he said, "I shall certainly advise her not to do anything so stupid."

He found the Queen in one of the cells below the police station. She was examining her bed critically. She said, "I've slept on harder places than this. I suppose I'll manage. I'd welcome one more blanket."

No extravagant denials of guilt. No protests. Jonas wondered how much it would take to disturb the serenity of this remarkable woman.

He said, "You're charged with receiving stolen goods, knowing them to have been stolen. It's the second bit that's important. I take it you'll plead not guilty."

"I certainly had no idea the silver was there. Anyone could open the back door of my place. It has a lock of sorts but a child could fiddle it. I never worried. There was nothing in the place anyone would want to steal."

"All right," said Jonas. "I won't bother you any more tonight. The police say they won't oppose bail, so you can come and talk to me about it as soon as they let you out."

But the talk they had on the following morning took them very little further. The Queen persisted in her placid denial that she knew anything about the silver. Jonas said, "We'll fight this at the committal and try to persuade the Bench that there's no case to answer. It's their job to prove that you knew the stuff was there, not yours to prove you didn't."

"I'm sure you'll do your best."

"You realize that the strongest card in their hand would be if you ran away."

"I'm too old to run," said the Queen.

When she had gone, Jonas summoned a council of war. He said, "I'm convinced the police have got some card up their sleeve. If they'd nothing to go on but guesswork they'd never have got a search warrant. *Someone saw something that night.* If we can find out and latch onto it, we might be able to cast enough doubt on the case to

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get it thrown out. I don't know quite how we're going to set about it."

"I can tell you one thing," said Sam Conybeare, who had attached himself to the conference. "You'll get a lot of help. Nobody likes the Grandfields much, and the idea's already beginning to get about that it was a put-up job. I met Clegg twenty years ago on the South Coast circuit. No one trusted him and I think he's got some kind of record."

"Proving that Clegg's been to prison isn't going to help the Queen. He isn't on trial. What we want is an independent witness. Search round, all of you, and see what you can rake up."

Three weeks later, on the eve of the hearing, he was forced to admit to the Queen that he'd achieved nothing. He said, "I'll do what I can for you in the Magistrate's Court, but I'm afraid it'll go up to the Crown Court. I'd better brief counsel for that."

It was at this moment that Claire put her head round the door and said, "I apologize for interrupting, but there are two young men who say they must see you at once. They're very pressing. I doubt if I can keep them out."

"Then let them in," said Jonas. He had a shrewd idea who they would be.

Ben and Billy marched in resolutely. They stood in front of Jonas's desk like two boys in the headmaster's study. They avoided the Queen's eye.

Ben was the spokesman. He said, "We've decided to come clean. Billy and me. We took that silver. We dumped it at the back of her place, just to get it under cover. She'd no idea it was there. Next night we were going to take it on to Brighton and get rid of it."

"How?" said Jonas.

Ben seemed disconcerted for a moment. Then he said, "We know people there who handle that sort of thing."

"I see," said Jonas. There was a fairly long silence, whilst the two boys fidgeted. Then he said, "All right, go along with my secretary, dictate a full statement to her, and sign it. I'll see that it gets in front of the Bench tomorrow. It'll be the end of the case against your Queen. But it'll be the start of a very serious matter for you. You understand me?"

Ben and Billy nodded. When they had followed Claire out, he said to the Queen, "Do you believe that?"

"Not a word of it."

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"If they go on with this, it's going to mean bad trouble for them. You realize that?"

"What a pair!" said the Queen. She gave a throaty chuckle. "And they're doing it for simple love of me. Tell me, Mr. Pickett, if you found anyone who was prepared to do that for you, wouldn't you consider that your life hadn't been entirely wasted?"

Jonas said, "You might be right about that. But—"

"Of course I shan't let them do it."

"How are you going to stop them?"

"I shall tell them I don't need them. I've got a very good defense without them. If you'd got me clear away at the Police Court, I shouldn't have raised it. If I'd been sent on for trial at the Crown Court, I suppose I should have had to. Now I'm afraid we'll have to use it at once."

She spoke for ten minutes while the expression on Jonas's face turned from surprise to incredulity and from incredulity to comprehension.

As soon as the Queen had departed, Jonas summoned Sabrina Mountjoy. She was not a woman who smiled often, but when she understood what Jonas was saying there was an expression on her face which, in a younger woman, might have been described as a grin. She said, "By God, if only we can prove it."

"There's a time element in this," said Jonas. "I don't want to ask for an adjournment, but it only gives me one day to locate our witness and persuade him to give evidence. I shall have to start the search in London, and I'm going up at once. If I'm not back by the time Court opens, you'll have to hold the fort. You can spend a bit of time cross-examining Mr. Grandfield."

"Yes, indeed," said Sabrina.

"Now, Mr. Grandfield," said Mrs. Mountjoy, "I'd like to ask you a few questions about the subject matter of this charge."

"About the silver? I thought I'd described it fully. I could do it again if you like."

"Not a description. No, I was interested, at the moment, in establishing your title to it."

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"The charge here is one of receiving stolen goods. The stealing is alleged to have been a theft of your property. I was therefore starting

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from the beginning and establishing that it *was* your property that was taken."

"Are you suggesting that I stole it?"

"I am not suggesting anything," said Mrs. Mountjoy, "and we should get on quicker if you refrained from flippancy."

Mr. Grandfield looked at the Bench to see if they were going to support him. Admiral Fairlie said, "I think this line of questioning is legitimate, although I cannot, at the moment, see where it is going to take us."

Mr. Grandfield said, "Then I'll answer the question. The silver is a collection known as the Croxton silver. I inherited it some twenty-five years ago from my uncle, Colonel Croxton."

"When you say that you inherited it—" Mrs. Mountjoy was studying a document "—is that strictly accurate? I have here a copy of Colonel Croxton's will. It does not, in fact, mention you at all."

The reporters looked interested, the Magistrate looked up, and the frown on Mr. Grandfield's face deepened. He said, "Need we go into all this?"

"Now that the point has been raised," said Admiral Fairlie, "it might be as well to settle it."

The audience was with him. They scented the possibility of a family scandal. It had long been known that the old Colonel had disliked his young nephew.

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Grandfield crossly. "There was no need to mention me by name in the will because the property was entailed. It came to me as the nearest male descendant. That was after both the Colonel's sons had been killed in Burma."

"But the entail would not have covered other property, would it? And I see that the personal effects—that would include the silver—were left specifically to his niece Clarissa."

"Yes."

"Then how did they come into your possession?" Mrs. Mountjoy had dragged out her questions to the best of her ability, with one eye on her watch. A telephone call from London, received just before the Court opened, had informed her that Jonas would be back by eleven o'clock. It was now nearly half past.

"Clarissa had gone abroad a short time before the Colonel died. No one knew what had happened to her. After seven years I and everyone else assumed that she must have died abroad."

"And you took over the silver as next of kin?"

Admiral Fairlie started to say, "That would surely—" but was

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interrupted by the arrival of Jonas, followed by a spry, white-haired old gentleman.

Jonas said, "I must apologize to the Court for not being present at the commencement of these proceedings, but I had the most urgent business in London. If you have no objection I will continue the cross-examination of this witness myself."

"That's entirely up to you," said Admiral Fairlie. He was looking at the old gentleman, who had seated himself at the end of the solicitor's bench. He had a feeling that he had met him before, but was unable to place him. Mr. Grandfield clearly knew him. He had not taken his eyes off him since he had come into Court.

"In fact," said Jonas, "I have only one more question to ask the witness. Mr. Grandfield, do you or do you not recognize the lady in the dock?"

"Recognize?" said Mr. Grandfield. "I—can't—"

At this point his voice seemed to stick.

"Come along, Charles," said the Queen briskly. "I know it's nearly thirty years, but I haven't changed all that much, surely?"

Mr. Grandfield opened and shut his mouth, but still no sound came out. Admiral Fairlie said, with admirable self-restraint, "Do I understand, Mr. Pickett, that you are in a position to prove the identity of the prisoner?"

"If I might call my witness."

Mr. Grandfield seemed thankful to leave the box. The white-haired old gentleman took his place, recited the oath with practised briskness, and said, "My name is Marcus Apperly. I was, until five years ago, the senior partner in the firm of Apperly & Hulbert. We acted for Colonel Croxton. I drew up his will and was well acquainted with his family, or with such of them as were left after the war. In particular his nephew Charles Grandfield, and his niece—" he shot a quick glance at the Queen, who smiled encouragingly "—Clarissa Oldshaw."

"And you recognize her?"

"Certainly. And even if I was not in a position to identify her, she has shown me papers which are, I think, quite conclusive. I'll be happy to produce them to you in due course. I should like to add that, in addition to making the will, the Colonel asked me to draw up the deed by which he dedicated an acre of his land to travelers. He had already heard that his favorite niece had some romantic intention of joining the gypsies, and I think he hoped that, if she

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did so, sometime, maybe long after his death, her caravan might come to rest on one of his fields."

There was a long silence. No one seemed to know what to say next. In the end Jonas said, "I take it, sir, you would agree that if we can produce proper evidence of this, there is no question that the charge can stand."

"I would entirely agree," said Admiral Fairlie, "that no one can be convicted of receiving stolen goods when they turn out to be their own property."

Late that afternoon Jonas and Mrs. Mountjoy sat in conference with Mr. Apperly and the Queen, now to be known as Clarissa Oldshaw.

Mr. Apperly said, "I've had a word with Grandfield's solicitor, Cedric Porter. He's a pompous ass, but he fully appreciates the position his client is in. If they'd gone to the Court for a formal presumption of Clarissa's death, we might have to go back to get it reversed. As they didn't, there's no need. The furniture, the pictures, and the silver will have to be handed over."

"There's not a lot of room for them in my caravan," said Clarissa.

"I'll be happy to arrange their sale. One of the pictures is a small but unquestionable Stubbs and two of the equestrian pictures are Herrings. They are in fashion at the moment and will realize a lot of money. It should be quite sufficient to enable you to buy a house and be comfortably off for the rest of your life."

Clarissa considered it. Extraordinary eyes, thought Jonas. An uncanny piercing blue, like sword blades.

"All right," she said. "Sell the lot. Except the loving cup. I'll keep that. I'll turn respectable and settle down in Eastbourne, among all the pussies."

"It will be a change after your previous existence."

"Don't talk about it as though it was an ordeal, Marcus. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I've learned to speak Polski, Romany, and Basque. And the people I've met—you've no idea. I'd write a book about them, only no one would believe it."

"Maybe," said Mr. Apperly severely. "I still think it was imprudent. However, there's one other point. I hear that Clegg has disappeared. Which is fair proof that what we thought was true. He did plant the silver in your place. Maybe the Grandfields put him up to it. Maybe they didn't. But in any event you clearly have a case against *them*. They brought a criminal charge against you, which

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turns out to be unfounded, and had you taken into custody. I imagine they'd be glad to pay handsomely to have it settled out of court."

"No," said Clarissa. "No. It's not worth bothering about." She was staring out of the window. "They'll both be dead inside the year."

It was, in fact, almost exactly a year later that the Grandfields were killed in a crash on the Portsmouth motorway—a combination of a lorry with inefficient brakes and an icy road. When Miss Mountjoy showed the newspaper report to Jonas she said, "I told you not to be cynical."

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SINGLE? Meet that special person—anywhere! Very low fees. DATELINE, 316 Fifth Ave., New York 10001. (202) 328-1300 or (513) 821-4600 or (612) 888-1240.

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Hundreds of sincere members! All Ages! Free information! Write: Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

SOPHISTICATED SCANDINAVIANS, all ages, seek enlightened correspondence, sincere friendships. Details: (please enclose stamp) Scannaclub-CO3, Box 4, Pittsford, NY 14534.

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SAVE MONEY TOO— BY READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

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RADIO & TELEVISION

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RECORDS, TAPES & SOUND EQUIPMENT

FREE Promotional albums, concert tickets, stereos, etc. Information: Barry Publications, 477 82nd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11209.

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SELL IMPRINTED T-SHIRTS, TOTE BAGS, CAPS, straight commission basis for 45-year-old Co. Universal Screen Prtg. Co., Inc., Box 12657, Gastonia, NC 28052.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY DURING YOUR SPARE TIME! Show our New Line of Calendars, Pens and Popular Advertising Gifts to local firms. Prompt, friendly service from small town AAA-1 Company in our 75th year. No investment or collections. Weekly Commissions. Set your own hours. Full Time Potential. No experience necessary. Write to Kevin Peska, NEWTON MFG. CO., Dept. BIE9, Newton, Iowa 50208.

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POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

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"HOW To Start and Operate Your Own Profitable Business at Home." Send for details. Enclose self stamped envelope to: L & H Co., P.O. Box 752, Frankfort, IN 46041-0752

TAPES & CASSETTES

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ATTENTION: Gumshoes, Flatfoots, Shamuses, Eyes, Coppers and Dicks. SHAMUS-7 wants you for a little game of murder. Everyone plays a suspect and a detective. With this challenging, new dual-role party game for SHAMUS-7, your parties come to life (and death) as dilettante detectives search for clues. If you don't solve it, someone else will. If you don't buy it, you'll wish you had. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or your money back. Natch, flatfoot. Send $14.95, check or money order to: SHAMUS-7, P.O. Box 274, Morton Grove, IL 60053 or call 1-800-SHAMUS-7 (in Illinois, 312-967-5335)—for more information.

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THE INTELLIGENCE LIBRARY: Many unique books & official manuals on RESTRICTED subjects—Bugging, Wiretapping, Locksmithing, Covert Investigation, & MUCH MORE. Free brochures, MENTOR, DP, 135-53 No. Blvd., Flushing, N.Y. 11354.

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR FICTION COMBINATIONS:
Mystery, Sci-Fi, or Special

OR TRY ONE OF OUR OTHER COMBINATIONS:
Combo #1, Combo #2, or Combo #3.

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.
For further information write to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department/Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

20 WORD MINIMUM
Only $59.00 for 20 Words or Less
$2.95 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $2.95 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ .....
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by ___x .85___

(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example. One 20 word ad $59.00 x 3 months = $177.00 x .85 = $150.45)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$59.00**	(2) **$59.00**	(3) **$59.00**	(4) **$59.00**	(5) **$59.00**
(6) **$59.00**	(7) **$59.00**	(8) **$59.00**	(9) **$59.00**	(10) **$59.00**
(11) **$59.00**	(12) **$59.00**	(13) **$59.00**	(14) **$59.00**	(15) **$59.00**
(16) **$59.00**	(17) **$59.00**	(18) **$59.00**	(19) **$59.00**	(20) **$59.00**
(21) **$61.95**	(22) **$64.90**	(23) **$67.85**	(24) **$70.80**	(25) **$73.75**
(26) **$76.70**	(27) **$79.65**	(28) **$82.60**	(29) **$85.55**	(30) **$88.50**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each.: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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9 *NEW* stories—including

JOSEPH HANSEN (about the tango bear)

PATRICIA McGERR (about Selena Mead)

JOHN MORTIMER (about Rumpole)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Libby Knowles)

TIM HEALD (about Dame Millicent and the Colonel)

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"The Dark Glasses" by MURIEL SPARK

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GET 12 BEST-SELLING MYSTERIES FOR $1.

GET $145.95 WORTH OF CHARTERIS, WESTLAKE, JAMES AND 9 OTHER GREAT WRITERS FOR $1.

As a new member of The Detective Book Club, you'll make your first big killing on our introductory offer: 12 of the best recently-published mysteries for $1.

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Bought in a bookstore, they'd cost $145.95. But as a new member of The Detective Book Club, you get all 12 tales shown for only $1...in four handsome, hardbound, triple-volumes.

As a member, you'll get the Club's free monthly Preview, which describes in advance each month's selections. They're chosen by the Club's editors, who select the best from more than 400 mysteries published each year. You may reject any volume before or after receiving it, within 21 days; there's no minimum number of books you must buy. And you may cancel your membership at any time.

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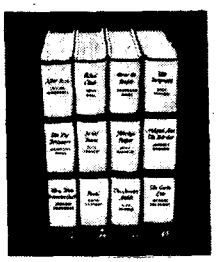

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4-HD
D21M8S

THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB, ROSLYN, N.Y. 11576.

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DETECTIVERSE

HIGH SPIRITS

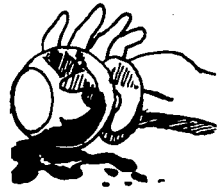
by RUTH REA

She couldn't stand her husband—
He was a drunken sot.
This lovely little lady
Did not deserve her lot.

She thought about divorce
But came to with a jerk—
If she left him that way
She'd have to go to work.

The easy thing, she told herself,
Would be if this guy died.
She had him well insured, you see—
This was the brighter side.

She put the poison in his booze
To make him feel more mellow—
And so when he departed life
He was a happy fellow.



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